

LONG JOHN NEBEL

RADIO TALK KING, MASTER SALESMAN, MAGNIFICENT CHARLATAN



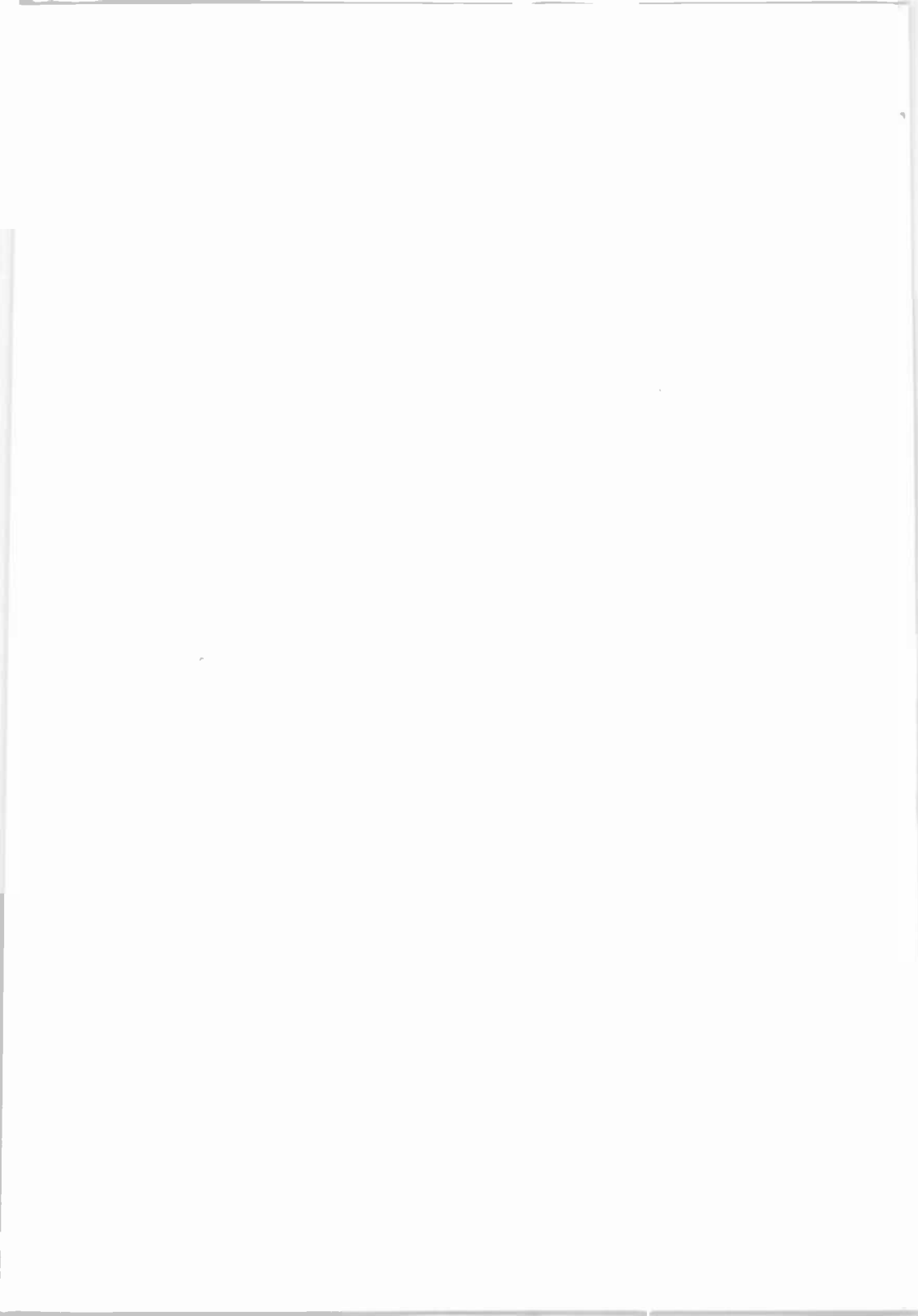
Donald Bain

Introduction by **Jackie Gleason**



“And h-e-r-e’s Long John, pitchman, radio talk king and one of the most fascinating slices of Americana I’ve ever known. I loved this book, and it opened a floodgate of memories for me. Long John Nebel pitched on the sidewalks of New York, while my turf was Atlantic City. That was a long time ago for both of us, and reading Bain’s biography of one of the greatest talkers of our time was nothing but a delightful reading romp. Long John Nebel—the public personality and the man—knocks me out, and so did this book.”
—**Ed McMahon**, “Tonight Show.”

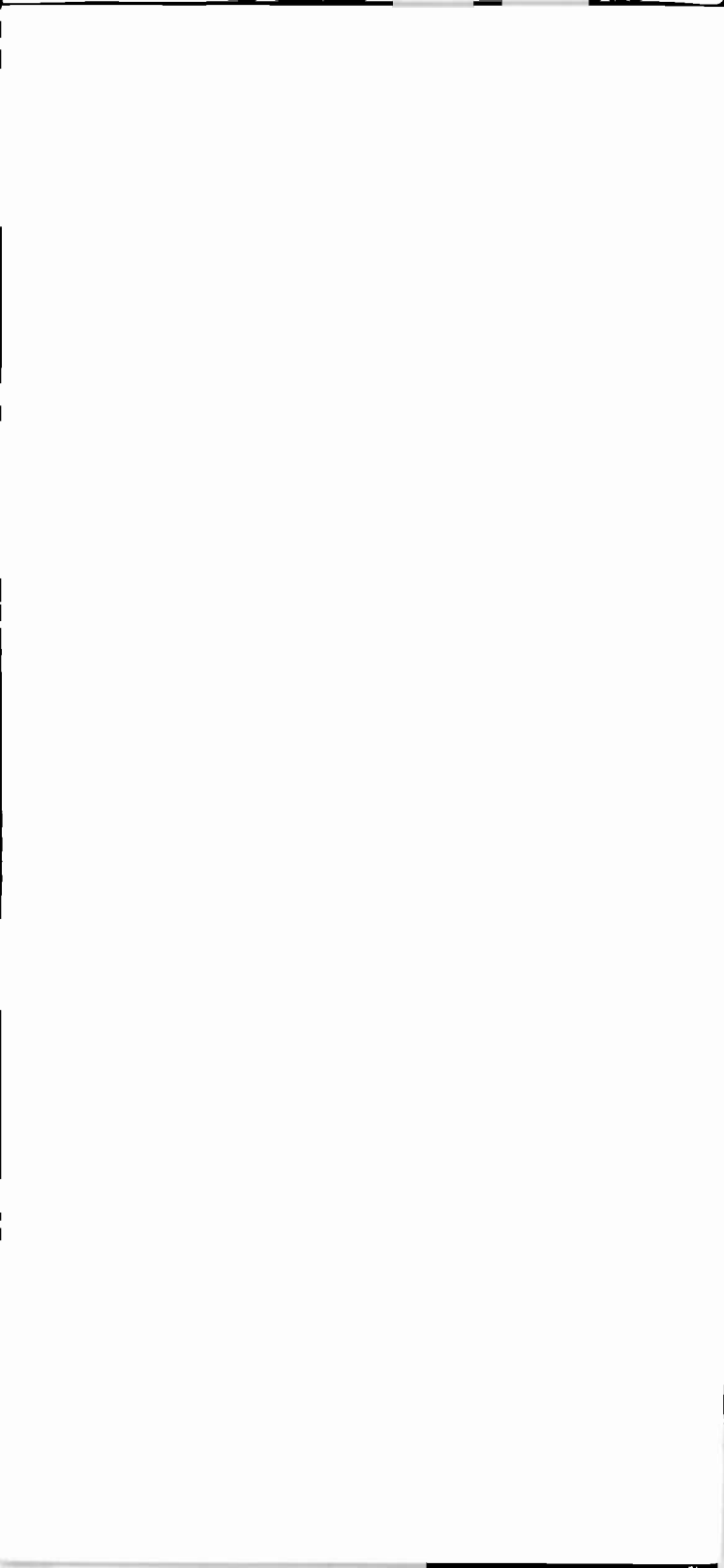
“I could not have invented a character like Long John Nebel. He’s simply too unbelievable.... a remarkable and fascinating book about a remarkable and fascinating man.” —**Irving Wallace**



“Armed with his doctored oranges and confident of the visual impact that the freely pouring liquid would have on prospective buyers, Knebel launched into his sell. *‘Watch closely, ladies and gentlemen, as I demonstrate the wonders of the extractor . . .’* Knebel squeezed lightly with his long, slender fingers, and watered-down juice trickled into a glass. He squeezed harder and juice gushed out. *‘You squeeze a little, you get a little. You squeeze a lot, you get a lot.’* By noon he’d sold out the gross and purchased another.”

That was in 1932—when he wasn’t yet Long John Nebel—just Jack Knebel, but doing then what he’s been doing ever since with consummate skill and controversial success: speling, selling, mesmerizing, and entertaining. And people listened to Nebel, no matter how outrageous the shams, because they recognized a master when they heard one. The product or undertaking didn’t make any difference: there was the curious but successful enterprise of the Sunfoot Remedies Company; Dr. Val Hubbard’s booklet on sexual happiness; the “revolutionary new merchandising aid,” bulb flashers; the short-lived banjo team of Knebel and Billson; and even a summer

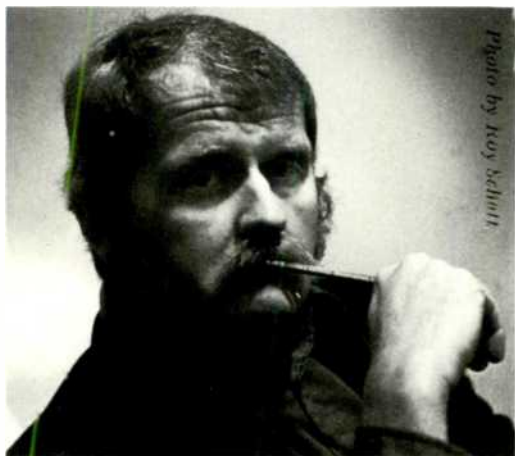
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(Continued from front flap)

spent hawking for a circus telepathist, Lady Olivia.

Donald Bain, author and sometime panelist on the Long John Nebel Show, has set down for the first time the full, frank life story of this extraordinary man, from his early days of shilling on Broadway to his years on radio as the "king" of the talk shows. Using interviews with both friends and enemies of Nebel, Bain discusses the ups and downs of Long John's career, his position in radio, his friendships and his feuds, his wives and his women, his memorable shows, the many panelists and great names who have appeared on the show (some of whom refused ever to return), and descriptions of some of Nebel's greatest "pitches."



Jacket illustration by Bruce Stark

DONALD BAIN is the ghost writer of a number of popular bestsellers as well as the biographer of actress Veronica Lake, and the author of *The Case Against Private Aviation*. Mr. Bain has worked for many years on radio, television, and movies, and has been a frequent panelist on the Long John Nebel Show.

LONG JOHN NEBEL

*Radio Talk King,
Master Salesman,
Magnificent Charlatan*

by Donald Bain

Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.

NEW YORK

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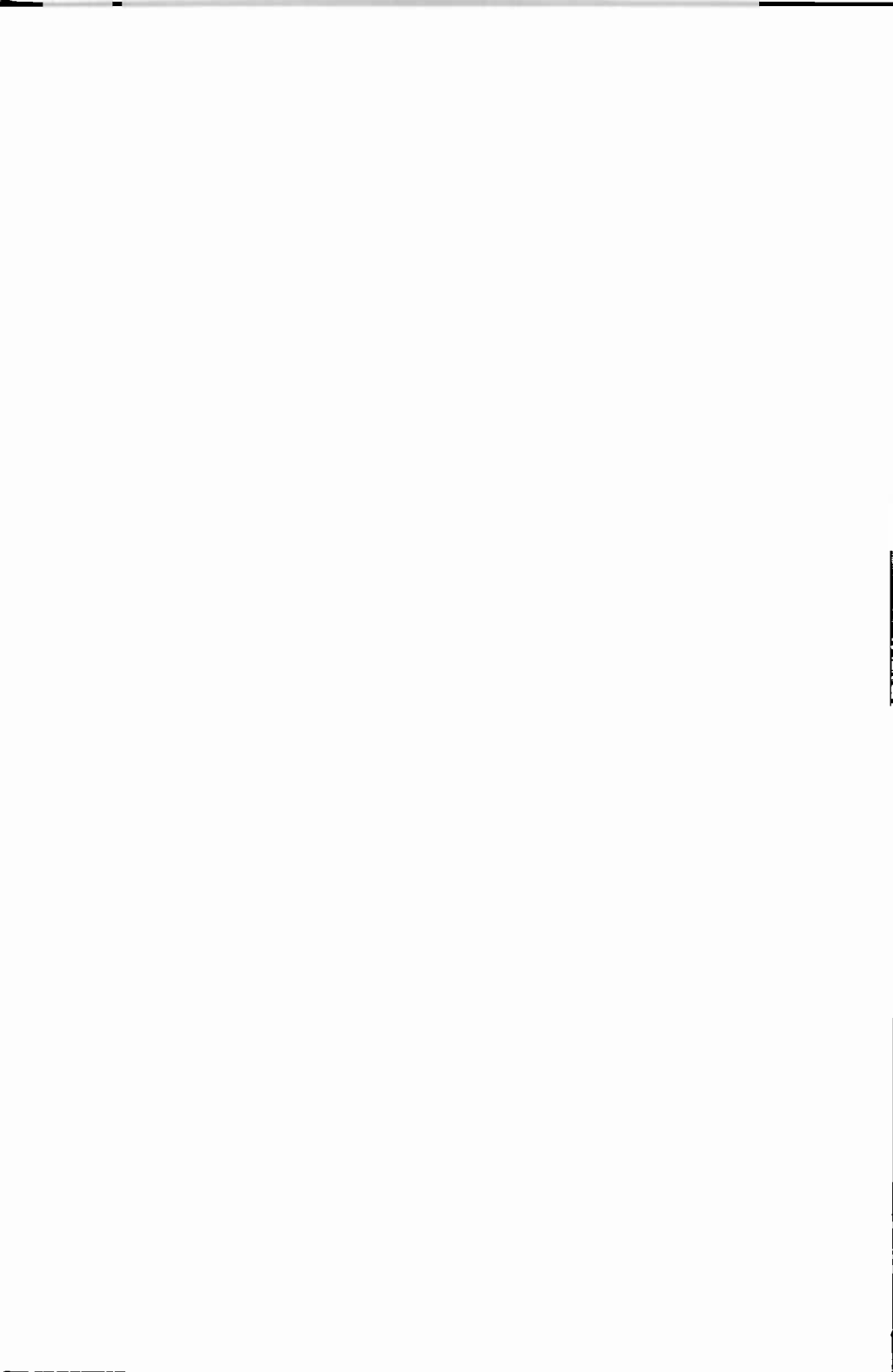
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LONG JOHN NEBEL



ALSO BY DONALD BAIN:

The Case Against Private Aviation

The Autobiography of Veronica Lake
(with Miss Lake)

For my daughters . . .
LAURIE and PAMELA
and Long John's daughter . . .
JACKIE

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Foreword

There are, of course, certain advantages in writing about the living. (Disadvantages too, as any lawyer can testify.) The living subject is there to be observed day by day, affording the biographer generous first-person experiences. I've been observing Long John Nebel since 1964, and have been a regular panelist on his all-night shows since 1969. Our friendship began somewhere around 1970. It isn't easy being Nebel's friend. It can be a tough, although rewarding, gig, as many of his musician friends would put it. He's very demanding in his friendships, and very giving.

It becomes more difficult when you inform him and his friends that you're planning to write his biography.

"Biography?" some of his friends say with lifted eyebrows. "Make it an autobiography," they *suggest*. "You don't have the right to delve into a friend's life for publication. It betrays the trust inherent in a friendship."

I don't agree. Writing the story of Long John Nebel was not conceived as a hatchet job. It was conceived with love and an abiding belief that he is one of the most unique figures to ever sit behind the microphones of a major radio station. For over

eighteen years he has reigned as king of all-night radio talk in New York. His nightly broadcasts have reached into thirty-five states, thanks to such broadcasting marvels as fifty-thousand watts and Skywave Antenna patterns. But, more important, he represents a threatened species of Americana, the bright, ambitious, enigmatic, and often lovable hustler, entrepreneur, and, as the title indicates, charlatan.

A word about the word "charlatan." I use the term in the title of this biography because, according to my definition, it perfectly fits my subject. To many people, the word rings of fraud, deception, and evil. It doesn't ring that way to me. "Charlatan," for this writer, simply means someone who is not what he represents himself to be. Accepting that definition, can my use of the word as it applies to Long John Nebel be seriously questioned? For years he peddled things, some of which occasionally worked, to buyers on the streets of New York, Chicago, and other cities. A charlatan is an illusionist. When Nebel enticed people to pay to see the famous headless woman, was he not practicing illusion? Of course he was. And could the Nebel sales approach for the Sun Foot line of "miraculous foot care products," a line he invented, be anything but the clever, albeit tongue-in-cheek, work of a charlatan?

"Ah, yes," reply his friends, "but he doesn't do those things anymore. For eighteen years he has been a respected broadcaster selling only those products in which he personally believes."

True. But what of Nebel, the man, during those eighteen years? Is he what he has always represented himself to be? Absolutely not! Is he really that brash, arrogant, nasty, irascible, egotistical, and completely maddening man who displays those traits nightly over the public airways? Sometimes. But most of the time, Nebel is doing *shtik*, that wonderful Yiddish word meaning, loosely, "bullshit." Nebel has done *shtik* all his life. He does it every day, on the air, on the street, in restaurants, at home. For me, the challenge of this book was to discover where the bullshit ended and the truth began.

The material for this biography comes mainly from three sources. First, I interviewed over a hundred people—some friends of Nebel, some enemies, and some who simply crossed his path for varying lengths of time and for various reasons.

Second, I conducted many hours of interviews with Nebel himself. Much of the material concerning his very early years, his childhood and teen years, came from him. His first wife, Lillian, was of immeasurable help in reconstructing Long John's life during the thirties. Also, old friends of Long John's, Ken and Bea Billson, contributed much anecdotal material about his young manhood.

The third source of material results from my own personal observations. I've been privileged to be part of what is known as "Nebel's inner fraternity," and have been privy to some of his most intimate moments. It is from this third vantage point—my own personal involvement with Long John—that stems most of the objections to the book by certain others in the Nebel fraternity. If their motives for objection are honorable, I accept them in that spirit, although not to the extent that I ever considered scrapping the project.

A word about the interviews themselves. There was never any problem in extracting words from those interviewed. The ability to talk is a requisite for friendship with Nebel. Each person interviewed was rich with anecdotes about him. But a few added the additional gold of true insight into the man. I thank everyone for the time and memories, but especially Drs. Hanna and Milton Kapit; author David Cole Gordon; Sanford Teller; Danny Bergauer, owner of Manny's Music Store in New York; Ken Fairchild; Barry Farber; attorney Kenneth Knigin; insurance man and bon vivant Al Lottman; Bill Roff and his wife, Carol; and author Jackie Susann.

I must also tip my hat to five of the six Nebel women who shared with me their years spent with Long John. They are all candid and interesting ladies, and one can only admire and applaud their honesty, especially when the pain began to show through.

Thank you, Dan O'Shea, my agent and friend, who sweated through the deadlines with me; and thank you, Bruce Carrick, my editor and friend, who established those deadlines only because he believed in the book.

My gratitude to my transcriber and typist, Donna Pelini, and to the Antolotti family and Joe Piscina of Antolotti's Restaurant, and to Richard Yee of Ho Ho. Nebel's taste in food is splendid.

Introduction

by Jackie Gleason

It says in this book that one night on the Long John Nebel Show, I took violent exception to a fellow named George King and offered ten thousand dollars if King would make good on his claims and produce a single Martian.

In case the money was wrong, I hereby up that offer to a million—with the stipulation that I have exclusive rights, for a year's time, to offer my Martian as a guest star on television.

What King might not understand—I think Long John Nebel would understand it—is that I would have loved to pay that ten thousand dollars.

And I'd love to pay the million.

Whether there's life on Mars is questionable; but I don't question that within the million million galaxies that stretch beyond us there is, somewhere out there, a brainier bunch than the collective vice-presidents of the three television networks.

Much as I liked Toots Shor's, I reject the idea that mid-town Manhattan has ever been the once and final center of the universe. I think it's instructive to ponder on worlds beyond this world and I also think it's entertaining. Most of what we are

told is entertaining is shoddy because it is always going over the same territory: mystery stories that aren't mysterious, jokes whose punch lines are telegraphed, predictable people in predictable parts.

Long John Nebel is the master of the unpredictable. That's where he separates himself from most of the entertainers and most of the thinkers, in a society where thinker-entertainers are hard to come by.

Contemplate the life of Long John Nebel. You have to be struck with the incongruity of it. A street merchant becomes one of the most celebrated names in radio and gets there by such an odd route that he is called in these pages the "ringmaster of the strange." Millions of people found, and find him, a gambler with the power to intoxicate.

Why is he so strangely entertaining?

Because the best entertainment is entertainment that opens up your mind and tells you that the world is bigger than you thought it was. I used to hear Nebel while riding around at night, and so I know that you keep listening to him because there's always the chance that something you hear on his show will do more than just open up your mind—it may blast such a hole in all your ordinary prejudices that you feel as though the Holland Tunnel had just picked up a new exit route through your head.

A lot of what Long John Nebel does is done quirkishly. Sometimes it is done as a practical joke.

I was a participant in one of the practical jokes. Long John brought me on one night as a final authority—in this case, a Final Authority on Steaks. Now I will pit my talents as a steak-eater against any man's, but my inside knowledge about the butchering trade is confined to the idea that you have to get the hide off the cow before you can carve it into New York strips. Nebel, the crafty, is strange enough to believe there's something foxy-funny in spoofing this kind of expertise. So we took all kinds of calls on his program, and I disguised my voice a bit and carried on as though I knew as much about cuts of meat as the Galloping Gourmet and Julia Childs put together.

Nebel can be a put-on. He can get his guests to do put-ons. But I have always had the absolute feeling from him that here

is a man trying, by humorous cross-examination, to discover that the world is more inexplicable than we like to think.

Once you toy with the idea that the fantastic can be real, you're in danger of seeming naive. Nebel, the cunning, avoids that trap. He punctures phony spacemen the way other people eat crispie-crunchies. He can enjoy a good con and expose it at the same time. But he doesn't kill the desire to distinguish between the phony mystery, cooked up for publicity reasons, and the genuine mystery, which offers us a chance to explore further in a universe whose rules we are just beginning to know.

Lately I've been reading about fluidic memory, a concept that would make them pause a bit on the Long John Nebel Show. Experiments have been conducted, indicating that fluid can be taken from the brains of rats who have been trained in certain ways and injected into the brains of untrained rats—and the rats so injected will “remember” what the other rats had been trained to do.

I mentioned this to someone who said, “My God, that's horrible! What if somebody took some Jackie Gleason fluid out of your brain and injected it into somebody who wanted a TV show?”

Something tells me it's not going to get that bad, and yet—fluidic memory! If it proves out, the possibilities might be tantalizing or terrible, depending on how we use the knowledge.

Nebel will agree with me, I think, that you don't shut off knowledge just because it shakes you up a bit. He's not averse to getting to the bottom of things. That's a particularly useful trait because it's my belief that we are currently hovering on the edge of probably the greatest story since earth began. I think oceans of bilge have been printed about planetary visitors but I think we are indeed being visited and that there is powerful—actually, indisputable—evidence of this. I believe our government is aware of it and is building up greater knowledge about it, but is puzzled and frightened at the prospect of sharing its knowledge. Astronauts have confided to me that they've seen flying saucers; I'm sure they confided it in higher channels, too. Nebel would not back away from such stuff. He would question it—he would try to find holes in it—but he would not be afraid to air it out.

One of the common denominators that runs through Long John Nebel's audience is a wary but open-minded approach to the psychic. Too many people have had too many things happen to them to rule out the existence of forces lying beyond the workaday wonders of electricity or telecommunication or radar. When you've had some experiences in precognition—sensing things before they happen—as I've had and as tens of thousands of others have, you question, but you question with an open mind.

At the age of sixteen or so, I read Butler's *Lives of the Saints* and it caused me to wonder if the miraculous happenings in the lives of the saints had also manifested themselves among lay people. Pursuing that puzzle, I was led into books on medicine and psychology and all branches of religion. But you can't get at the authors and instigators of such works when you're in an armchair with a book. Nebel has filled that gap—he pulls authors and instigators in front of a microphone and lets the world have at them and we find out how they stand up to it.

If you're a visitor from Outer Space, I advise you to contact Long John Nebel immediately. He'll question your credentials but if you've got the goods, nobody makes a better qualifier than Nebel. He's tough enough so that some day he may even get to the bottom of those official files where the government, so remarkably uncommunicative about it, conceals what it knows about visitors from space.

I suppose one reason it's difficult to get the government to surface with this information is simply—fear. Fear that Somebody Up There is more intelligent than we are, more advanced. The fear is legitimate because if *they've* learned to get here before *we've* learned to get there, that's a prima-facie case that their technology—and perhaps, therefore, their brains—is more advanced. Do we, perhaps, fend off information about visitors from other spheres through a subliminal fear of conquest? That's a legitimate fear, too. When a highly civilized group of people gets mixed up with a people of lesser intelligence, the lesser group usually deteriorates. From our schoolbooks we may vaguely remember that all it took was something like 168 Spaniards to splatter the empire of 16 million Incas. So the prospect of even a handful of celestial visitants has its threatening side.

I happen to enjoy Long John's approach. He prefers scrabbling for the facts, and puzzling over them, and laughing at them, and challenging them, to getting all uptight over which side would win a war of the worlds. I think we're winners when we enlarge our knowledge. If there's somebody in outer space who's brighter than we are, maybe they're also bright enough to know that war and conquest and kicking people around is not only heartless but a waste of time.

Chances are I'll live and die without anybody trying to inject fluid into my brain to make me a different person. But if I had to have fluid from another brain, I'd be willing to have just a squirt or two from the brain of Long John Nebel.

PART ONE



1

"I don't even think about the pills anymore."

On a clear day you can see almost forever from the south and east balconies of the twenty-ninth-floor apartment belonging to Ken and Eunice Knigin. Kenneth Knigin, who practices law in New York, has extensive political relationships. He is also a close personal friend of Long John Nebel. When Knigin heard Nebel planned to marry the former top model, Candy Jones, he insisted the wedding take place in his apartment. It did, on Sunday, December 31, 1972, giving Long John his second legal wife, and in his words, "a last-minute tax deduction."

The wedding day was somewhat of a disappointment for Eunice Knigin. The fog rolled in overnight, enveloping Manhattan in a gray wet cocoon. It was like being married in a cloud. Eunice had hoped the thirty guests at the ceremony would be able to enjoy the view while sipping sparkling burgundy and nibbling finger sandwiches. Had Nebel chosen the weather, however, he most likely would have opted for the fog. It cut off views of everything *except* the ceremony. It focused attention on his beautiful new wife, on his circle of close friends, and on the white leather and chrome that dominate the apartment.

4 Long John Nebel

Nebel means "fog" in German.

The ceremony was impressive in its simplicity and dignity. It was conducted by Milton Mollen, a New York State Supreme Court justice and a close friend of the Knigins. Nebel was nervous. It had, after all, been only twenty-eight days since his courtship of Candy Jones began. Courtship? Indeed, in the classic romantic sense. Long John Nebel, the late-night king of radio talk, can also be the proverbial freshman in the dorm when love strikes. Those close to him received nightly calls during the courtship, breathless calls filled with wonder at what *she* said during dinner and at what *he* was feeling. "Why would she bother with me?" he often asked. Strange talk from a man who for seventeen years has sat for five hours a night with the biggest guns in government, publishing, entertainment, and business and felt completely at ease doing it. An unlikely reaction from a man who has enjoyed the intimate companionship of a number of women in his lifetime. An uncharacteristic response for someone branded brash, arrogant, nasty, and egotistical by thousands of radio listeners.

But that is, after all, the salient point about Long John Nebel. Nebel, the radio personality, the demanding first-nighter, has little to do with Nebel, the man. Of course, professional and personal lives intertwine. But it came as no surprise to anyone on the receiving end of Nebel's phone calls during his romance with Candy Jones that he was displaying all the manifestations of insecurity, all the trappings that come with an acute lack of a sense of self-worth. For Long John Nebel really is a terribly complex public man whose personal life funnels into one of extreme simplicity.

"I do!" Nebel said in response to Judge Mollen's question. He said it *to* the judge, then realized he was to say it to Candy. "I do!" he said again, this time to her. Candy turned to her eighty-two-year-old mother, who is hard of hearing, and pointed to her ear, indicating she'd tell her mother later what had been said.

At Candy's side was Nebel's only child, Jackie, from his first marriage. She was markedly thinner than when I first interviewed her for this biography of her father. She wore a powder blue dress, and her honey-blond hair was neatly styled. The guests

leaned on odd pieces of furniture or sat on the white leather couches or on the folding chairs rented for the occasion. Present were bandleader Sy Oliver and his wife, Lil; Sandy Teller's wife Judy and their son Jonathan; publisher Lyle Stuart, dressed in a gray suit and flannel hunting shirt; Mr. and Mrs. Danny Bergauer; Dr. and Mrs. Robert Rowan; public relations man Bob Carson; Bill and Carol Roff (Bill manages Nebel's apartment building); Drs. Hanna and Milton Kapit; Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Consentino; Mr. and Mrs. Gene Sanger (he owns Kwik Kopy); Gene and Shelly Frisch (Gene is an NBC engineer and a close Nebel friend); Joe Piscina; the Knigins' daughter, Randy; Al Lottman, the best known of the Nebel radio panelist fraternity, who almost didn't show up because he thought Sandy Teller's phone call announcing the wedding was a joke; and this writer and his wife.

Nebel was dressed for his wedding in a blue blazer, muted checkered slacks, a striped shirt, and solid-color tie. His hair, worn long and loose these days, was slicked back, giving him the crew-cut look he had during his earlier radio days. As I sat watching him go through the marriage ceremony, I wondered what thoughts had filled him during the hours preceding the actual event. Until he met and fell in love with Candy Jones, his moments alone were filled with thoughts of suicide—of “packing it in,” as he termed it. Nebel has had a lifelong fascination with death, and an adult commitment to suicide as an end. This commitment had been contemplated with regular and deepening urgency since January of 1971, when Nebel was told, following surgery, that he had cancer. In January of 1972, the management of WNBC relieved him of his regular midnight-to-five time slot and put him on from eight-until-midnight, a dismal radio time slot and an indication that the station was committed to even greater changes in the months to come. Those greater changes caught up with Long John Nebel in August of that year when he packed up his office and left WNBC after an eight-year run. WMCA, his present station, had not finalized its thinking on bringing him over to join its roster of talk personalities, thus leaving him without a microphone for the first time in over sixteen years. Added to his problems was the breakup of an almost five-year love affair, a rocky relationship in which con-

flicting viewpoints clashed with increasing regularity. All of it—the cancer, the job, the break-up—gave Nebel more than enough cause to seriously consider taking the pills he had so carefully and secretly collected and hidden over the years.

“. . . I spend a lot of time just thinking, reviewing my life,” Nebel told me in the spring of 1972. I sat with him in the early morning hours in his cluttered one-bedroom apartment on Manhattan’s East Side. “I sit on the edge of this bed, light one cigarette after another and stare down at the parquet floor for hours. I don’t sit here and admire the grain or anything. I’m not trying to pick up flaws in the workmanship where the guy who installed it didn’t snug it up close enough to the next piece, although I can tell you about every little flaw in these six pieces under my feet. I just sit here, sometimes with a cup of hot cocoa or soup, and cry my fucking eyes out and just want to pack it in. I’m old and just don’t want to go on any longer.”

“Do you still want to end it, John?” Dr. Hanna Kapit asked him one evening in December 1972, during a commercial break on the show. This was after he’d met Candy Jones.

“No!” he snapped back. “I want every minute I can buy now.”

Following their marriage, John Nebel’s apartment became *their* apartment. For Candy, it must have been like moving into the Long John Nebel Museum. It is a direct extension of Nebel’s life, a showcase of seventeen years on big-time radio. Situated in a twenty-story building, the apartment is one of two at the end of a long carpeted hall. At one time, Nebel had both apartments, one serving as his office and recording studio. He gave it up in an economy move when WNBC dropped some of the extra programs he was doing. Now, everything is crammed into the one apartment. The hallways connecting the foyer, living room, and bedroom, made impossibly narrow because of the extra closets he had constructed to house an extensive wardrobe, are never lighted. The bedroom is in the back; so is the kitchen and bath. In reality, the bedroom is the *living* room; the front room usually referred to as a living room is given over to massive professional tape machines, a huge set of Musser vibes given Nebel as a gift by Danny Bergauer (Nebel learned the first eight bars of a Phil Moore arrangement of “The World Is Waiting for the

Sunrise" the day the vibes were delivered and hasn't had the cover off them since), expensive stereo equipment, books (books are everywhere, in every corner and on every wall of every room, including the hallways, most of them autographed by authors who have appeared on the shows), guitars, banjos, magazines, cameras (the *best* cameras, none of which has ever had a roll of film run through it because Nebel, the former professional photographer, doesn't want to risk scratching them), record albums by the thousands, and a varied assortment of other *things*. There is, of course, a couch, some chairs, and a few tables, none of which is accessible without moving something else.

The bedroom, where Long John Nebel really lives, is small. The double bed is framed by a bookcase headboard on which are placed most of the telephone gadgets known to the Bell System. Besides an inordinate number of telephones themselves, the headboard contains machines for answering calls, taping calls, and dialing numbers, the latter a device that automatically places a call when a prepunched card is inserted. There is an automatic clothes presser, another stereo, a portable TV, radios, and again, books and records. One book, *Overcoming the Fear of Death* by Dr. David Cole Gordon, is represented by six copies, each of which has undoubtedly been read by Nebel four or five times.

Long John Nebel—the public Nebel—is known by millions of people who have listened to his talk shows during those lonely, brooding hours of the late night and early morning. For many, he has been the difference between life and death, providing the only conversation they will enjoy that day. Thousands love him, thousands hate him, which only indicates the obvious—you don't just listen to Nebel; despite yourself, you participate emotionally, intellectually. Some listeners call when Nebel opens the phones to discuss the night's topic. Telephone monitoring devices have recorded as many as forty thousand attempts to reach him during the two-hour period between 3:00–5:00 A.M. Careful, now, with your first words. Upset him, cross him, offend him, and you may well be holding a dead receiver. Don't bother venting your anger by phoning back and calling him a string

of four-letter words. He'll press the button and cut you off again, and your invective will never reach the air because of a seven-second tape-delay device.

Long John Nebel describes himself as a loner. Although there is a certain amount of truth in the statement, it is more a matter of Nebel telling you what he wants you to believe about him. Brad Crandall, who for years conducted New York's most literate telephone talk show until he became fed up with the agony of New York and moved his family to Colorado, had this to say:

"There are two basic views of Long John Nebel. One consists of cynical, tough, slightly shady stories about a man whose character seems flawed and mean. These stories are usually the ones told by John himself. The other view is taken by those who know him as something quite different. . . . I have always thought that somewhere in his lifetime John heard the line 'Nice guys finish last,' and determined to do his best to hide any niceness from the public view."

Crandall's wife Ellie, who worked at NBC, chalks up Nebel's exterior cynicism to professional necessity, saying, "Cynicism is a natural armor of all his [Nebel's] worlds, particularly that of the last seventeen years in radio. The best way to become the most sought-after, used, abused, and lied-about guy on your block is to have a successful talk show." She speaks from experience.

It is true that the private Nebel, known only to those closest to him, differs to a large degree from the public image he creates. This is not to say that to know him is to love him. To suggest that would amuse too many of his enemies. The point to be made is simply that people are not always what they seem, and this is particularly true in the case of Long John Nebel.

A loner? No. Lonely? Acutely so. The loneliness of Long John Nebel has nothing to do with physical companionship. The Nebel women (there have been six important ones) span forty-two of his sixty-two years, and there has never been any prolonged period of time between them. A surface analysis of that fact would indicate that he is a swinger. Nothing could be further from the truth, unless, by definition, "swinger" is determined by numbers. In reality, John Nebel represents, at least to this writer, the antithesis of the swinger, as popularly con-

ceived. His marriages and affairs—a Nebel affair is usually more binding and more filled with commitment than many legal marriages—are conducted with a surprisingly old-fashioned morality. Again we grapple with definition. My morality is not, and should not, be yours. Perhaps when you've finished reading about these women in Nebel's life you'll consider him immoral, even amoral. His separation from his first wife, Lillian, in the seventeenth year of their marriage, the year their only child was born, will strike some as callous, particularly since he immediately began a relationship with a woman named Helen, whom he met while selling photographic supplies. Charlotte, a dress-shop manager, came next, but only after John and Helen had lived together as man and wife and treated each other with all the love and respect called for in the words of all the world's marrying clergy. Then, after an unhappy period with Charlotte Harrington, Long John Nebel fell in love with Terry Garrity, better known as "J, The Sensuous Woman." Their affair, short-lived, was a torrid one; following its termination, he fell madly in love with a girl whose father had been a close friend of his. To be more precise, the younger girl fell madly in love with him. His love followed. It was a tumultuous relationship, filled with intoxicating highs and dangerous lows.

And now, Candy Jones, legally Mrs. John Nebel. It has been suggested by one of Nebel's close friends, a psychologist, that his entire romantic life has been but a warm-up for Candy. Their courtship and resulting marriage has produced in Nebel a startling change in his mental outlook. No longer does his inner circle wait for the phone calls during which he talks of "packing it in." There are no more tears, no more sighs of despair. But there is still, I suppose, the loneliness that accompanies feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness, insecurity. Would he feel this way if he had not dropped out of school after the eighth grade to pursue a life of door-to-door selling, carnival talking, and street peddling? If he felt completely at home pronouncing those big words used by the doctors on his show, would he enjoy heightened security? At the age of forty-three he entered into a world unknown to him—big-time radio—and for over eighteen years has reigned as king of all-night talk in the toughest radio city in America. He receives a hundred thousand pieces of mail a year, most of it

favorable, too much of it carrying such addresses as "That Kike Prick Nebble, WNBC, N. Y." People wish him throat cancer. They inform him they are praying for his penis to fall off. They ask for a loan, advice, his concern over their current plight. On the brink of suicide, they call in and challenge him to save them. And they buy the products he sells on the air. Publishers claim he sells an author's book better than ninety percent of the other talk shows around the country. Schools in which budding radio and TV personalities train use him as an example to be studied and emulated. He travels Manhattan in a limousine, but washes out his socks and underwear in the sink. He successfully battles, point by point, a Ph.D. on his program, and falls helplessly silent during frothy chitchat at the dinner table. Often, in his day-to-day relationships with women, he makes El Exigente appear henpecked; but then he runs home during a news break with a steak sandwich for "his lady" because she said she didn't feel tip-top. He introduced to New York visitors *from* Mars, and visitors *to* Venus. He has perpetrated on millions of listeners the most outrageous tales since Orson Welles brought us *War of the Worlds*. We have learned from Long John Nebel that there is an invisible bridge between the RCA and Empire State buildings, and that the Empire State Building turns on huge gears located in the basement; indeed, some have sat all night in their cars with their children waiting to see it turn. No listener to Nebel would ever be foolish enough to step on the White Line of Ecuador, where a zero-gravity condition exists, or ever light another candle without thinking of the secret wick farms in the Midwest. For seventeen years the secure and insecure have listened at midnight to hear, "*Hi there, this is Long John Nebel, coming to you through the facilities of WOR [or] WNBC [or] WMCA.*" He is, for many, the last bastion of security in an unsure world, and yet while his strident and menacing voice extracts from guests and callers alike the guts of a subject, there dwells within him the loneliness of his own insecurity.

After the wedding ceremony, Candy Jones, now Candy Nebel, sat chatting with Jim Lavetty, Nebel's son-in-law. It's no surprise that she looked beautiful; she once graced the covers of seventeen magazines in a single month. Now dressed in an off-white brocaded afternoon suit and fingering her hand-bouquet of

white orchids, Old English Ivy, and twigs of seasonal holly, she was the bride of Long John Nebel, one of the great talkers of our day, whose sixty-two years had seldom taken a pedestrian path in his search for self-fulfillment. Undoubtedly, during those twenty-eight days of courtship, Long John told Candy much about the life that brought him to where he is today. We are, after all, nothing more than the sum and substance of what we were. And what twenty-one-year-old Jack Knebel was on a hot summer day over forty years ago was a young man with a goal—and a problem.

2

*“You squeeze a little, you get a little.
You squeeze a lot, you get a lot.”*

They were all there that sunny July day in 1932: Dirty Murphy, the Cowboy, Svengali Tex, Graveyard Slim—the elite of New York’s sidewalk-talker fraternity. They leaned against Sally’s, their nickname for the Salvation Army on Fourteenth Street, comparing notes on how the action had been the previous day and preparing for another day of selling on the city’s streets. Graveyard Slim was loaded up with mechanical pencils, a good noontime seller uptown. He was waiting for his regular shill to show up, the fellow who helped attract the crowd and lead it in enthusiastic appreciation of Slim’s sales pitch. The Cowboy had already picked up the rented pushcart from which he’d sell white caps, those jaunty hats of the day, with the button on the small peak, that were worn by the golf-playing rich of Newport and Long Island’s gold coast. *“These handsome white caps are being offered below cost to introduce you to the manufacturer’s superior line of quality clothing merchandise. As a direct advertising representative of the company, I have been authorized to . . .”*

All New York street vendors used that line; it took care of the

skeptics in the crowd who wondered how quality caps could be sold for fifty cents. Actually, it was just plain good fortune to have run across an advertising representative who, through the merchandising foresight and expertise of his company, could offer, for only fifty cents, a quality white cap with brim and button so that each person could become, "*a walking, talking advertisement for the manufacturer.*" There would be those in the "tip" (street-talker vernacular for a crowd), who might have wondered why a multimillion dollar manufacturer would have as its advertising representative a man with a frayed collar, a soiled shirt, a suit in desperate need of cleaning and pressing, dirty fingernails, and a three-day growth of beard. But if the talker was good, his word-magic dispelled those misgivings. After all, it was the Depression, and most people's suits needed pressing. And a bargain is a bargain, in good times and bad. Forget the talker's appearance and focus on the merchandise in his keester, a leather suitcase that, when open, rested on a tripe. A tripe was constructed of four pieces of quarter-round molding. A piece of leather was attached to the four pieces half-way down, allowing them to spread out and form legs upon which the keester could be displayed. A piece of rawhide attached to the tops of the quarter-round kept them from spreading too far.

The Cowboy had started selling caps in front of Sally's. His regular shill was at work admiring the caps and trying them on. He was a scruffy-looking individual; the caps looked comic on him. At least that was Jack Knebel's reaction. He stood apart from the crowd and watched the Cowboy and his shill at work. The Cowboy noticed him.

Most people noticed Jack Knebel. Six feet four-inches tall, and weighing 127 pounds, he wore his elegant plaid Mervin S. Levine suit like a catalog model. His hair was neatly trimmed and slicked back, and a thin moustache gave him a matinee-idol quality. His highly polished black London Character shoes (Style No. 1306), popular with ballroom dancers because of their light weight and slim profile, contrasted with the heavy, lubberly shoes worn by others on the street. To complete the picture of a wealthy young man-about-town, probably an emerging Broadway star out slumming, he carried an ebony walking stick with a rococo head. Today, he might be called a fop; but on July 5,

1932, the day the Cowboy spotted him, Jack Knebel could only be described as a seemingly wealthy young man of gentility and urbanity.

The Cowboy decided to move the cart to another corner where customer traffic would be heavier. It was noon, so he had to move fast to catch the lunchtime crowd. He had started to take down the mounted mirror used by prospective buyers when Knebel approached him.

"Do you need a booster today?" Knebel asked. His use of the term "booster" was an awkward though acceptable substitute for "shill." Shills, also called sticks, timber, or cappers, did, in effect, boost the talker.

The Cowboy gave Knebel a closer look. It didn't add up, this skinny young guy with the expensive clothes asking to shill for a talker. But he wasn't going to let skepticism get in the way of finding a good capper. He could visualize Knebel trying on the white caps, modeling them in front of the mirror. The tip would have to feel that if the caps were good enough for this elegant young man, they would be good enough for them, too.

Knebel and the Cowboy talked for a few minutes. Then the Cowboy noticed Dirty Murphy eyeing Knebel. Murphy wasn't called "Dirty" because of his personal hygienic habits, but because he would steal a good street corner away from another talker before the rival had a chance to realize it was happening. He'd do the same with a good shill. That's what worried the Cowboy. Knebel, with his expensive, freshly pressed clothes, would make a perfect shill, and he didn't want to lose him.

"Come with me," the Cowboy said to Knebel, after first telling his shill he'd be gone for a half hour, and instructing him to take the pushcart around the corner where there was less likelihood of the police passing by. He led Knebel to a nearby Automat and bought two cups of coffee.

"Look, I don't wanna be nosy or anything, but you don't figure to me. Gimme a square count. You a cop or somethin'?"

Knebel laughed. As far as he was concerned, no cop ever looked as good as he did. But he didn't say this to the Cowboy. He looked him squarely in the eye and said, "I'm not a policeman. I've been in show business and I'm tapped out. I got married recently and my bride is pregnant. [She wasn't]. She's

waiting for me at Grand Central Station. I need a few bucks. How about it? Can I boost you?"

"OK. I'll give you a deuce for the rest of the day."

Knebel was delighted. Two dollars was exactly \$1.60 more than he had in his pocket.

Knebel and the Cowboy sold caps in Times Square. It proved to be a fruitful pairing of talents. The white caps sold at a brisk pace with the Cowboy talking and Knebel shilling, although Knebel was convinced he could do the talking better than the Cowboy. In fact, he was confident he could out-talk most of the talkers he'd seen on the street. Although only twenty-one years old, he'd been selling things since he was thirteen and had made some scores that would make veteran salesmen weep with envy. Years later he would become one of the greatest salesmen in the history of radio, but in 1932, selling was a survival exercise for Jack Knebel. What's more, it was true that he had recently been married—as recently in fact, as that very morning. And his bride Lillian Schubert, a seventeen-year-old dark-haired German-American beauty, was sitting in Grand Central Station waiting for her ambitious young husband to return with money and to tell her where they would be spending their wedding night.

That evening, after the Cowboy had returned the rented pushcart and stashed the leftover white caps in a Times Square locker, he took Knebel for another cup of coffee.

"It went pretty good, Jack. You make a good shill."

"Thanks. Can I work with you tomorrow?"

"No, I won't be here. I'm heading up to Boston tonight to work some fairs. I'm picking up caps there. My wife and kids are up there now. Maybe when I get back we can get together. Where are you staying?"

"I don't have a place." For all practical purposes, it was true. There was his parents' posh apartment at 325 Riverside Drive, but that was too risky; they had gone away for the Fourth of July weekend and would be returning any time. A few months earlier Knebel had moved out of their apartment after another in a series of battles with his mother and father (actually his stepfather) over Lillian who, they felt, was "not good enough" for their son. If they were to return home and find Jack and his bride

sharing a bed, the resultant scene would be too difficult for young Knebel to face at the moment. Besides, he was now out on his own and wanted no help from his parents. To accept help would be to admit defeat, and defeat was a condition Jack Knebel was hell-bent on avoiding.

The Cowboy made what was an extremely generous offer to a stranger. He offered Knebel and his "pregnant" bride his apartment until he and his family returned from Boston. Knebel accepted.

"You know what I figured you for this afternoon?" the Cowboy asked as they shook hands on the street.

"A cop?"

"No, a newspaper reporter. That's what I figured you for. A reporter getting a story on street-selling." Knebel laughed. Cops and reporters. Neither group wore Mervin S. Levine suits and London Character shoes, Style No. 1306. But young men on the way up did. Knebel fingered the bills the Cowboy had given him and headed for Grand Central. As his fingers separated them, he realized there were three. The Cowboy had given him a dollar bonus. It was an act of generosity Knebel never forgot. Nor has Lillian. She laughs when she recalls that wedding day in July 1932.

"I came to learn that the skinny fellow I married, who dressed like a Fancy Dan, would always come up with something when we needed it. He was very, very ambitious, always scheming."

The Cowboy's apartment was in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn and was, to quote Lillian Knebel, "a dump." Jack bought two cans of beans and a box of graham crackers. It was the couple's wedding dinner, and although the surroundings were dismal and the food hardly what a young bride would expect on her wedding table, they were a happy, hopeful couple. Any fears Lillian might have expressed were talked away by her husband.

"Lil, I'm going to make a big score. Just wait and see." It was not an empty boast, considering the huge success his radio career became from the late fifties to the present. But Lillian was not with him during those radio years; they had, by that time, separated and divorced. Nevertheless, during their marriage, she

was to see her husband enjoy several successes in the myriad selling adventures he undertook.

The following morning, after a breakfast of the remaining beans and graham crackers, Knebel boarded the El and headed for Manhattan. When he arrived at Sally's, he saw that the talkers had already lined up their shills, so he went to Times Square, an area he'd previously haunted in search of a show business career before marrying Lillian. Times Square in the thirties was the nation's show business Mecca. It held out the promise of names in lights, applause, respect, and high-toned fun. For Knebel, it was where he belonged, and he looked it. His suit, the same suit worn the previous day, held its crease. His shirt was freshly laundered. He twirled his walking stick and admired his image in store windows. He looked good. He knew it.

The talkers were hard at work "representing multimillion dollar corporations." Knebel recognized some of them. He stopped and admired, or was critical of them and their shills. "That's a great buy! I'll take three!" a shill would yell, digging into ragged pockets for the money the talker had given him before they had started out in the morning.

"Ladies and gentlemen, come on in closer. That's it, right in close. I especially want those men and women wearing glasses to pay close attention to what I have to say. And if you don't wear glasses, you're about to be exposed to a product that when given as a gift to a friend who wears spectacles, will give that person a gift as precious as sight itself. Right in close. That's it. I have here before me a miracle substance developed by the leading chemists of the Continent. It's an eyeglass cleaner. That's right, a miracle substance for cleaning the lenses of your everyday eyeglasses. After you've cleaned your eyeglasses with this product, you'll see through them as you've never seen before. You'll see things you didn't know were there. You'll see life as life should be seen, through sparkling clean lenses. Now this miracle eyeglass cleaner sells for a great deal of money in Europe. However, as an inducement to you, I have been authorized by the manufacturer to introduce you to this miracle product at a fraction of its European price. My company, a multimillion dollar . . ."

The eyeglass-cleaner gaff was of particular interest to Knebel (a "gaff" is the talker's term for a pitch, or high-pressure sales talk). Knebel knew the so-called miracle cleaner was nothing more than common brown laundry soap cut into small pieces and wrapped in whatever material was readily available to the talker.

That gave him an idea for making his own eyeglass cleaner. He headed back to the apartment in Brooklyn, stopping on the way to buy three huge boxes of Ivory soap flakes, a box of pink Rit dye, and a supply of lead foil commonly used by florists to wrap the stems of corsages. He also bought two more boxes of graham crackers for Lillian. To this day, she cannot look at a graham cracker without feeling nauseous.

There was an enameled drop-leaf table in the Cowboy's kitchen, the kind found in millions of homes in the thirties. When the leaves were raised and secured into position, a crevice was formed where each leaf met the body of the table. Knebel placed shirt cardboard in the crevices, forming two parallel cardboard walls running the length of the tabletop. He placed more cardboard at the open ends, holding these pieces in place with books and kitchen paraphernalia. The result was a large mold made of shirt cardboard, with the enameled tabletop serving as the mold's floor. He rummaged through kitchen cupboards and came up with the biggest pot he could find, which he set over heat on the gas range.

The first step in the manufacture of Jack Knebel's superior eyeglass cleaner was to pour the Ivory soap flakes into the pot. Then water was added gradually until a thick, syrupy mixture was produced.

"Keep stirring, Lil," he told his wife.

She did, continuing until the mixture became hot. When Knebel felt the time was right, he added the pink dye. Soon the ingredients became a pleasant potful of pink molten soap.

"What happens now?" Lillian asked.

"We'll pour it in the mold and let it harden. Then I'll cut it up into small pieces and wrap it in the foil."

It seemed logical to Lillian. She watched her husband struggle with the heavy pot as he carefully poured the mixture into the mold, starting in the middle and dripping the pink mixture

progressively towards the cardboard sides. The cardboard kept the ingredients contained with only a minimum of leakage at the corners. When all the contents from the pot had been emptied into the mold, it formed a lake of pink soap, the overall visual effect being much like a large pink sheet cake.

At this point, there wasn't much for Knebel or his wife to do but wait for the mixture to harden. They made love in the Cowboy's bed, and drifted off into the sleep induced by sexual satisfaction. Jack awoke two hours later. He quietly slipped away from his wife's tentative grasp and looked out the window. The sun was setting; the air was cooler. He walked into the kitchen and gingerly, like a cook testing fudge, prodded the pink mixture with his finger. The ease with which his finger went to the bottom of the mold caused him to recoil. It was taking longer than he expected. Still half asleep, he went back to bed.

The next time Jack woke, it was because Lillian was shaking him. "Jack, listen," she said, a tremor in her voice. He held his breath and strained to hear what Lillian had heard. It took a moment for the sound to establish a pattern, but once it did, it became a ceaseless rhythmic series of sounds, like tiny feet marching across a floor.

"It's mice, Jack."

He decided it wasn't mice; they'd have to be marching in cadence to achieve such a regular pattern of sound. It was something *dripping*. He leaped up and ran to the kitchen. One end of the mold had given way to the weight of the soap mixture. The pink glop, still in its liquid state, was running out through the open corner. Most of it was on the floor. Knebel grabbed some leftover cardboard and began scooping it up. Most of it rolled off the cardboard before he could reach the pot. Lillian grabbed a piece of cardboard and scooped along with her husband. They were on their knees when someone started banging on the apartment door. Knebel opened it a crack. A beefy gentleman, with a heavy Polish accent, wearing a tattered bathrobe and carpet slippers, asked for the Cowboy. Knebel told him the Cowboy was away, and that he and his wife were houseguests. The man tried to see through the small opening, but Knebel closed the door even further. Finally, the man asked if

Knebel and his wife were making something soapy and pink. Knebel hedged. The man told him that something pink and soapy was leaking through his ceiling.

"Just a little domestic accident," Knebel said. "It's all taken care of now. Thanks for dropping by." He closed the door and hurried back to Lillian, who was still on her knees trying to contain the mixture. They spent the better part of the night cleaning the Cowboy's kitchen.

For the moment, the mishap with Knebel's better-quality eyeglass cleaner dashed his enthusiasm for improving on established merchandise. He went out the next morning and bought bars of common brown laundry soap, cut them into tiny pieces, and wrapped the pieces in lead foil. He hit the streets with the merchandise dressed in his usual elegant manner, adapting the talker's standard pitch for eyeglass cleaner to suit his own style. Even with the inferior product, Knebel was successful. Within two days, he'd made thirty-five dollars. Of course, there was overhead: the cost of the soap, additional foil, lunches. But by the time the Cowboy and his family returned from Boston a week later, the Knebels were able to move into a small hotel room on West Forty-third Street. The room contained a sink that was, as Nebel recalls, "the size of the Cowboy's pot." The bathroom was down the hall. "For a guy used to living on Riverside Drive, this whole style of living was a great inconvenience to me," Nebel says. It was not so great an inconvenience for Lillian, although the lack of cleanliness at the hotel was difficult for her to stomach.

Before marrying Jack Knebel, Lillian Schubert lived with her mother and sister in a brownstone in the Yorkville area of New York, the German section of the city. Her mother was a hard-working woman who kept their modest home immaculately clean. During Jack's courtship of Lillian, her mother liked him very much. But when he called his mother-in-law to tell her that he and Lillian had been married, she expressed her disappointment in him. She had, quite naturally, been worried when she hadn't heard from her daughter for two days, but after mother and daughter had spoken on the phone, Lillian told Jack what it was that had further upset her mother. When the couple decided to go to New Jersey to get married, they didn't

have a dollar between them. Lillian had gone to the druggist in her neighborhood and told him she'd lost five dollars of her mother's money. The druggist loaned her five dollars, and the marriage was bankrolled with that money. Lillian's mother heard about it from the druggist. Typical of her, she paid him back. It was also typical of her to forgive Jack and to welcome him into her family.

Knebel's parents were not so forgiving. As far as Jack was concerned, they were powerless to do anything because he was of age; but Lillian, at seventeen, was not old enough to marry without her mother's consent. They therefore went to Lillian's mother and demanded that she have the marriage annulled.

"They're married now. Let them stay married," was Mrs. Schubert's reaction to the demand. They stayed married for twenty-five years, although they were separated for much of the later years. Knebel's parents cut off communication with the bride and groom for almost a year, until a business venture brought them together again.

Parental notifications out of the way, Jack Knebel settled down to the business of earning a living. Even with his ability to sell, there were days when the customers weren't buying. At first, Knebel felt he was good enough to work without a shill, but he soon recognized his need for a partner. Lillian feels it was more than just a need for a shill that caused her husband to take on someone. "He needed a partner in everything he did," she told me. "Jack always needed someone to work with, someone who would talk to him and praise him."

Knebel would get up in the morning, dress in his Broadway best, and set up his keester in subway stations, Times Square, Broadway—anywhere he could gather a tip. He was also learning that the better the location, the more likelihood there was of police being part of the crowd.

"He was always getting arrested," Lillian says. "I never knew whether he'd be home or down at the court. Once he was arrested three times in one day."

On that day, he gone out from the hotel where he and Lillian were staying and began selling fountain pens. To be literally correct, however, it should be pointed out that street talkers never *sold* pens. They *gave away* pens. What they were

selling were fountain-pen *points*. Nebel explains the philosophy behind the difference. "No one wanted to buy a fountain pen because most people had a drawer full of pens at home. But they couldn't resist getting a free one, and, I might add, they also received a free mechanical pencil. All they had to do to receive the free items was to buy a point for the pens they had at home."

The pen points and giveaways were contained in Knebel's keester, which, like many being used by talkers, contained a false bottom where the bulk of the merchandise was hidden. By displaying only a limited quantity to the tip, the talker could say with conviction, "*You'd better buy now, folks. I have only a limited supply left.*" Once that crowd had been sold, the talker moved on to another corner where he replenished his supply from the false bottom.

" . . . I'm going to pass these miracle pen points among you with a magnifying glass so you can see for yourselves that they are a special type of radium-tipped point." [Of course, they weren't. But the power of suggestion is the salesman's most potent weapon. The customers looked at the points through Nebel's magnifying glass and nodded their heads in agreement that the points were, indeed, radium tipped]. "With these special radium-tipped points you can write in the ordinary manner and get a normal broad line. Or, if you're an accountant, you can turn the point on its back—and this is one of the few pen points you can do this with—you can turn it on its back and get a fine, or what is known as an accountant's line. . . . Now these fine points are usually sold at the rate of twelve dollars a dozen. They are really a dollar-fifty apiece, but accountants and other people who use them a great deal buy in quantity. Today, we are going to advertise. We are going to sell you one of these points for only a dollar. Now, no doubt you have many pens at home. But chances are they do not have a proper point, a radium-tipped point. What I am going to do is give you one-for-one—one fountain pen with a radium-tipped miracle point already attached. I am going to do this to make you a walking, talking advertisement for the Miracle Pen Company. The pen I am going to give you is a three-fifty value alone. Now that means you are going to get one point for a dollar, and you're going to

get yourself a pen with an automatic filler that draws up sufficient ink to write up to one thousand or fifteen hundred words in one filling. And you will have a radium-tipped point already attached to the pen. Plus, to make you a walking, talking advertisement for the Miracle Pen Company, we are also going to give you a mechanical pencil. It propels the lead, repels the lead, expels the lead, and even misspells sometimes. . . . But have no fear. Pull off the back and you have a little eraser, for people who make mistakes, the same reason that they have rubber mats around cuspidors. And when you remove the eraser you'll find an extra magazine—a year's supply of lead as well. Now the complete combination is just one dollar—let me repeat that again—you will receive for just one dollar a miracle point, a fountain pen and the mechanical pencil for just one dollar.”

Those who have been regular radio listeners to Long John Nebel over the past sixteen years will recognize certain portions of the pen-point gaff in his commercials. It isn't so much the words as it is the intensity, the sincerity, the feeling of one-to-one, the phrasing and pausing for emphasis. It wasn't long before Jack Knebel was recognized as one of the most effective talkers on the streets of New York. He carried that ability into broadcasting, and many sponsors have benefited from it.

Knebel did a brisk business that morning in fountain-pen points. He was about to pack up his keester and tripe and head for another location when two members of the Mendicant Squad, New York's special police detail charged with the policing of peddlers and panhandlers, came up from behind and took him to court. He was convicted, fined, and released. After lunch at Thomsen's, a landmark restaurant frequented by talkers and shills where a fried-egg sandwich cost a nickel, he headed out and sold pen points on another corner. He hadn't even finished his opening pitch when he was again arrested and taken to the same court. The judge was the one who'd fined him that morning, Judge Greenspan. After a stern warning and another fine, Knebel was again released.

By now, he was afraid to set up shop again. He decided to abandon the pen points for the day and panhandle. Still dressed in a superbly tailored suit and carrying his walking stick, he approached the first well-dressed man he saw and asked for

money. The man turned out to be a policeman. Once more Knebel was arrested and taken to court. He wasn't too worried because he was in a different section of the city and thought he would be facing a new judge. But when he walked into the courthouse, he was confronted by Judge Greenspan, who was filling in for the regular judge, who was ill.

"Haven't you been before me twice today?" the judge asked Knebel.

"Yes, your honor, but those times were for selling without a license. I wasn't selling this time."

"What were you doing?"

"I was panhandling."

The judge shook his head. "I would think two arrests in one day would have kept you off the streets, selling *or* panhandling."

"It should have, your honor. But my family is hungry and we haven't any food. I was just doing whatever I could to feed my family."

Judge Greenspan came over to Knebel, put his hand on his shoulder, and led him into a small room off the courtroom.

"Would you like a job, son?" the judge asked.

"Yes, sir. I certainly would."

The judge told Knebel he could arrange to get him a job cleaning the men's room in a park. The thought of it struck Knebel hard, but he maintained his facade of willingness. Judge Greenspan, after telling him where to go to apply for the job, shook Knebel's hand and pressed a coin into it (Knebel claims it was a dollar; Lillian swears it was fifty cents).

"Thank you very much, sir," Knebel said, leaving the court as quickly as possible. He went home to the hotel and told Lillian of his day.

"You, clean a men's room?" She laughed long and hard at the image. She was right, of course. Her husband was back on the street the next day selling miracle fountain-pen points.

While Jack Knebel made a living on the streets, Lillian tried to make the tiny room as comfortable as possible. The hotel was infested with vermin, and she recalls their waking up many mornings with bites all over their bodies. Their diet hadn't changed much since the honeymoon at the Cowboy's. Hot plates were forbidden at the hotel, so beans and graham crackers

remained the staple foods. The beans were heated under the hot water faucet. "Actually," Nebel says, "The water from the hot faucet was only slightly warmer than the water from the cold faucet, and the cold water wasn't cold enough for a decent glass of water." Still, a half hour under the water took the chill off the beans. The only luxury-food purchases in those very early weeks of the marriage were candy and popcorn, two items to which Jack Knebel responded with all the cravings of an addict.

"He loved candy," Ken Billson says. Billson, recently retired from Western Electric, was Jack Knebel's closest friend during his early days in New York. "Any kind of candy—jelly beans, bags of cheap candy, boxes of it. Candy was a big deal to Knebel. So was Nedick's. A frank and an orange drink. He hated to sit down to a meal and was always grabbing something at Nedick's and talking about his big plans for the future."

Today, Long John Nebel wouldn't think of eating a piece of candy, and sitting down to a meal has become a ritual in his daily life. But he cannot eat alone. There must always be someone to talk to, someone to listen.

"He was satisfied even if I just had a cup of coffee while he ate, as long as I was there to listen," Billson recalls. He was always a great conversationalist, and I was a good listener. That was one of the reasons we got along so beautifully.

"I also used to shill for Jack, even after I started working at Western Electric. Before I had a day job, I shilled for him in the street. After I started working, I'd go down to the Sixth Avenue auction houses where he was working at night and shill there."

Ken Billson wasn't the only shill Knebel had in those street-selling days. One of his most effective shills was Lillian.

"I couldn't stay in that room we were living in," she says, "so I used to go out and shill for him. I'd stand there and look interested and be the first one to buy whatever it was he was selling. And all the suckers would come in after me. I usually shilled in the morning at subway stations. We'd go home and take a nap, and he'd go out alone in the late afternoon with another item, like orange juice extractors."

Juice extractors were big with street talkers in the thirties, and Jack Knebel had the sell down to a science. He purchased his

first supply of extractors from a lady whose business was supplying "quality merchandise" to street talkers from her basement shop on Seventeenth Street. Her leading item in those days was a package of needles and safety pins which, when embellished by skillful talkers, became packages of "rare and keenly honed fastening devices."

Knebel stopped in to see her, and she sensed he was new to the street.

"This is going to be a very hot item," she told him, dragging out a juice extractor. Knebel examined it. It was made of aluminum and shaped like a fat pencil. One end was beaded. This was the end that went in to the fruit, aided by a wooden plunger. When the plunger was removed, the serrated aluminum shaft ("*Nine knifelike cutting edges!*") was left in the fruit and twisted into its core.

"How much?" Knebel asked.

"Seven dollars and twenty cents a gross."

"I'll take a gross."

With his keester filled with the juice extractors, Knebel headed for Patty's Market on Ninth Avenue and bought oranges. He set up shop on a midtown corner and began his spiel, which was a blend of stock phrases and original Knebelisms: "*Yours for only a dime. . . . That's right, only one dime and you have at your fingertips the natural, healthful, energy-producing juices of man's most precious gift, citrus fruit. . . . Oranges, lemons, limes, grapefruit. . . . A slight squeeze and Nature's sweet nectar is yours.*"

Knebel went through the business of demonstrating the device which, as was not always the case with street merchandise, actually worked. Customers in the tip watched as he squeezed the oranges and the juice trickled out through the shaft. He had to be careful not to allow his face to reflect how hard he had to squeeze, but nevertheless, his first day was a success. He sold out the gross, which gave him a profit of one hundred percent on his investment. The extractors were obviously an appealing item, but he didn't want to have to squeeze so hard to extract enough juice to impress the crowds.

The solution came to him that evening in the hotel room. The next morning, after buying another gross of the extractors, he

went to a medical supply firm and bought a hypodermic needle. He filled the needle with water and injected it into the oranges. The result was exactly what Knebel wanted. The water, when mixed with the real juice of the orange, provided an abundance of orange liquid when the fruit was squeezed. With only a few moment's practice, Knebel found he had complete control of the output.

Armed with his doctored oranges and confident of the visual impact that the freely pouring liquid would have on prospective buyers, he launched into his sell.

"Watch closely, ladies and gentlemen, as I demonstrate the wonders of the extractor. . ." Knebel squeezed lightly with his long, slender fingers, and some of the watered-down juice trickled into a glass. He squeezed harder and the juice gushed out. *"You squeeze a little, you get a little. You squeeze a lot, you get a lot."* By noon, he'd sold out the gross and had purchased another. He worked the juice extractors for weeks, sometimes with Lillian as his shill. It was his first successful New York gaff, but only a preview of what was to come.

3

“Pardon me, sir, in your moment of grief.”

Things were looking up for the Knebels. They left the hotel after six weeks and took a small basement apartment on the Upper West Side. Ken and Bea Billson remember visiting the Knebels for Sunday dinners, when Lillian cooked chicken (her mother had taught her how after she'd married Jack). Mrs. Schubert, called “Ma” by her son-in-law, was good to the couple. They frequently ate dinner at her house, and she often slipped Jack a quarter so he could buy cigarettes. Ma was very fond of Jack, although she sometimes worried about his constant concern with new ways to make money. “Someday his brain will snap from all that scheming,” she told her daughter.

“It was very exciting for me,” Lillian remembers. “Never a dull moment, never knowing how we were going to eat. But we always managed and never went on relief or to our parents. Jack did anything to make a dime or a dollar. He worked hard for it. Very hard.”

As Jack Knebel continued to sharpen his street-selling techniques and to expand his line of merchandise, the young couple began to see some financial light. They bought furniture on time

at Ludwig Baumann's, and soon moved to a better, though small, apartment at Seventy-ninth Street and East End Avenue. And Knebel was beginning to worry about the direction in which his life was moving.

"He was always uptight about his future," Ken Billson says of this period. "He talked of finding himself all the time." This search for self-understanding, through psychiatry in later years, has remained a lifelong interest for Long John Nebel, and hundreds of his radio shows have been on this subject.

"My career has always been everything to me," Nebel says. "Something no woman could ever compete with. It led to my breakup with Lillian. I was wrapped up in making it big, and she wanted to settle down into a more normal life than we were leading."

Lillian refutes this, although it is evident (and eminently understandable) that after ten years of the talker life, the shill life, she was ready to change lifestyles. "It really wasn't the scuffling life of a talker that was difficult for me—that was fun. But Jack was a difficult man to live with. He was so domineering and was always telling me I didn't know how to do anything right. He was a perfectionist. Everything had to be just so."

Knebel, the talker, continued working the streets. He sold a spot remover, which was nothing more than soap. The technique was simple. Knebel held a piece of colored chalk between his fingers so that the "mark" (talker term for a customer, or sucker) couldn't see it.

"Let me show you how this miracle spot remover works. You, sir, you seem to have a stain on your jacket. That's right, on the back of the sleeve here." Knebel would touch the spot, rubbing chalk on the jacket. *"It appears to be dry paint, one of the most difficult stains to remove. But with this miracle spot remover, even dry paint is whisked away."* He would then rub the soap on the chalk, brush it away, and sell a dozen packages to the other marks in the crowd.

"He also sold razor-blade sharpeners," Lillian says. "The sharpeners were two marbles held together by a small wire bracket you'd buy from a supplier of street merchandise. I can remember sitting and putting those marbles in the holders until I thought I'd scream."

Knebel rented a small storefront on Sixth Avenue in which he demonstrated and sold merchandise. Like any astute store manager, he knew the window had to contain something to attract and stop the passing crowd. Lillian was perfect. Knebel dressed her in black velvet shorts and a white top, and had her sit on a stool in the window. Once enticed inside, the customers were treated to Jack Knebel saying: "*These superior double-edged blades give you a faster, a cleaner, a smoother shave with one downstroke. . . . Each blade is individually tested under Cooper Huet lights to insure you. . . .*"

To heighten interest in the window, Knebel put a black Lone Ranger-type mask on Lillian. When a crowd gathered in front of the window, Lillian beckoned them inside with a coy smile and a nod of her head. They followed and watched as she hopped up on a chair on the countertop, where Knebel gave his pitch.

Knebel used the storefront for other gaffs, including a few carnival presentations. One of these was an embryo show. Knebel borrowed this display from his father's attorney, Samuel List. List had handled the closing of a small carnival and had taken possession of a number of the show's features. The embryo show, which Knebel took into his Sixth Avenue storefront, consisted of "*the actual specimens of unborn babies, displayed for you here today to allow you to witness the stages of birth of a human being. . . . Please bring the specimens closer, nurse. . . .*" The "nurse" was Lillian, who had exchanged her Lone Ranger mask for a surgical one, and the "actual specimens of unborn babies" in the display jars were rubber facsimiles of embryos.

"When things really got tough, the talkers resorted to the stuffed-envelope gaff," Nebel recalls. He and his fellow talkers didn't like working stuffed envelopes. but when there was nothing else, they adopted an any-gaff-in-a-storm philosophy.

The first time Knebel worked stuffed envelopes, he began by going to the lobby of a posh hotel on the East Side and relieving it of its complimentary envelopes. His next stop was the automat, where he gathered up a supply of napkins. Each envelope was stuffed with two napkins and sealed.

"*Gentlemen, I have in these envelopes an assortment of pictures every red-blooded man enjoys. . . . Now, I don't want to talk too loud, so please come in close—thank you. . . . Gentlemen, these*

rare and imported photographs of men and women in their most intimate moments are guaranteed to make your hair stand on end. It will take ten cakes of ice to cool you off. . . . Now, gentlemen, I don't want you to open these envelopes on the street. I want you to take them home and in the privacy of your own home, your own room—and first pull down the shades, lock the door, and plug the keyhole—look at these pictures. . . . Gentlemen, I repeat, these are the kinds of pictures every red-blooded man likes to see, to study, to enjoy. The complete assortment is just one dollar. I only have a few sets, so gather in closely and buy them now. . . .”

As with all successful salesmen, Jack Knebel acted primarily from instinct. There were, however, certain techniques that could be identified and explained, techniques that are as valid today as they were then.

The first step in any successful sales pitch is to gain the attention of the potential buyer. Nebel is critical of today's advertising copywriters for what he considers their lack of understanding of this first principle. I was present in his WNBC studio one night when he was explaining his approach to selling Mountain Valley Spring Water, the bottler of which has been a Nebel radio sponsor for over fifteen years. “You have to capture the buyer before he realizes he's being sold,” Nebel said. “With Mountain Valley, I like to lead in by saying something about health. ‘I want to talk to you for a moment about your health, and the health of your loved ones. Now, each of you knows that a person with a cardiovascular problem must keep down the sodium content of his or her food.’ [Nebel is doing the commercial for us now; he's into the pitch, his hand punctuating, his voice strident. The use of the cardiovascular lead-in is typical of him. Nearly everyone is concerned about such conditions as cardiovascular problems, even though they are perfectly healthy at the time. Nebel also knows that a high proportion of his listeners are interested in medical subjects. and consider him an expert in the field.] “Now, we all know that water plays a v-e-r-y important role in our health. And I know that each of you wants to maintain your health as best you can. That's why I want to personally recommend to you that you try Mountain Valley Spring Water, water that comes from deep beneath the ground,

water that contains none of the filth and bacteria we are used to getting from our common, everyday water supply."

Nebel's success with Mountain Valley Water is especially impressive when the nature of the commercial is taken into account. Unlike most radio or television commercials in which the announcer simply extols the virtues of the product and hopes the audience will respond by purchasing it, the Mountain Valley commercials ask the listener to send in his name and address and, in some cases, money. A similar situation existed with Super-M Vitamins, another longtime sponsor. Listeners could buy the vitamins only through the Nebel show, and were asked to send in three dollars for each bottle. In these situations, the results of a commercial are easily verified. Either the cards, letters, and money come in, or they don't.

But how do you inspire a listener, alone in his or her room at three in the morning, to dig into a pocket, address an envelope, and mail it to Long John Nebel? You do it, according to Nebel, by making the listener feel guilty, uncaring, or just plain stupid if he doesn't respond:

" . . . I want each and every one of you within hearing distance of my voice to reach into his pocket and take out a dollar bill . . . "

In the thirties, Knebel had made a good business out of selling *"the revolutionary new sex booklet written by the world-famous authority on sexual happiness, Dr. Val Hubbard."* Actually the four-page booklet was run off on a duplicating machine by a fellow who supplied street talkers with eyeglass cleaner, needles, and juice extractors.

"I'm looking for five men who have complete and total confidence in me. . . . Are there five men who will raise their hands to show that confidence to me? . . . Good! [You can always get five people to raise their hands.] Now bring down your hands and put them in your pockets and take out a dollar bill. . . . All right, will you raise your hands again? . . . Wait a minute, there seems to be something wrong. I count nine hands in the air—well, maybe I counted wrong. All right, I'll accept the nine. . . . Now I have with me one of the most interesting and useful booklets ever published on the art of making love. . . . Just a minute. I forgot to ask whether any of you nine men are under the age of eighteen. You must be over eighteen in order to buy

this booklet. . . . Let me count again. Will all of you nine men who are over eighteen raise your hands again? [Nebel would do a slow count, ending it with a shake of the head] Well, I guess I've forgotten how to count—I see fourteen hands in the air now . . . That's all right. Fortunately, I have enough booklets on sexual love to satisfy fourteen lucky purchasers. . . . This booklet, published by the famous Pelham-Heath Institute of Sexology, contains specific and detailed advice on how to stimulate the female to new heights of sexual passion. For instance, there is a section dealing with a woman's back. And there is a spot on every woman's lower back that when touched by the male creates tremendous passion in the woman. It is grossly unfair to ever touch her in that spot unless you are prepared to extinguish the fire that builds within her. . . . Now you look like a decent group of men before me today. I'm certain that none of you would be so crude as to touch that secret spot on your wife or female companion's back when in a crowd, on a subway, or in a theater. . . . This particular section dealing with the back is found on page—I forget the exact page, but in reading the entire booklet you'll come upon it. . . . Now I want those original fourteen men who raised their hands to raise them again. [The count by now had swelled to twenty or more] I hope I have enough booklets to satisfy this demand. And I might add that those of you who showed confidence in me at the beginning are going to receive, absolutely free, a gift—this gift has nothing whatsoever to do with sex. One of the nation's largest manufacturers of quality needles has asked me, knowing I speak to large crowds of intelligent and sensitive men and women, to give away to my audience valuable packages of its product. They ask me to do this to make each and every one of you a walking, talking advertisement for this company. And I want to tell you something [Knebel's voice would lower, dripping with sincerity.] Wherever I work, whether I'm selling vitamins or Old World Herb Tea or Miracle Eyeglass Cleaner, my customers absolutely rave about this free product. . . . It is, ladies and gentlemen, a valuable, king-size package of fifty gold needles [his pace would pick up]. There are small needles with large eyes, large needles with small eyes, some are totally blind [he'd lead the laughter]. Small-eyed, large-eyed, no-eyed, cockeyed needles. Yours f-r-e-e, with the

purchase of Dr. Hubbard's startling book on sexual love, in which there are ac-tu-al drawings of human genitals. . . . Just come up with your dollar bill. . . ."

You can hear Knebel's former street sell in every commercial he's ever done. Listeners are complimented on their intelligence, instructed to act ("*reach in and come up with a dollar*"), told the supply is short, flattered to think that they have good enough taste to appreciate the product. They are enticed to read an author's book to find the exact page where juicy material is concealed (Nebel's involvement with Jacqueline Susann's best-selling novel, *Valley of the Dolls*, used this technique), and thankful they were listening at the right time to be able to enjoy the sensational offer being made.

Long John's successful fifteen years of salesmanship for Mountain Valley Water owes a great deal to his street-selling experience. However, the one difference—and a major one—is that Long John Nebel of radio insists that he has to believe sincerely in any product sold on his show. Dr. Hubbard's sexology book would not be acceptable to Nebel on radio. In fact, Nebel is one of a handful of New York broadcasters with a clause in his contract that gives him the right to personally reject any sponsor. In practice, he accepts about half of those sponsors offered him, often turning down a perfectly good product simply because he himself did not enjoy using it.

"I called Long John Nebel fifteen years ago to tell him we were interested in his show as a commercial vehicle for Mountain Valley Water," comments John Scott, president of Mountain Valley and president of the American Bottled Water Association, a trade association.

"I'm drinking some right now," Nebel answered Scott when he called.

"John has to believe in a product," Scott says, "and I think it's a good approach. He's so sincere when he talks about the product that you *have* to believe him."

Jack and Lillian Knebel continued to scuffle to build their financial base, and Ma Schubert became more and more impressed with her ambitious son-in-law. When spats occurred between the couple, Ma invariably took Jack's side. She had, at that time and until her death, a gentleman friend, who was im-

pressed with the dashing Jack Knebel, and who was a good audience for Jack's stories of the street talker's life. Once, when Jack was between products, the man offered to get him a job with the New York City Sanitation Department, assuring Knebel that he would rise to the top of the department after twenty years.

"It might be good to settle down, Jack," Lillian said after hearing of the offer. She knew her husband wouldn't dream of taking such a job, but she was expressing an inner desire for security. There was also the question of children. Lillian wanted a child, but realized that their hectic, day-to-day existence was not the sort of life in which a child would prosper. She didn't realize at the time that the insecurity of their life was proving to be an effective contraceptive. It wasn't until they had separated for three months in 1948 and come back together in a temporarily more relaxed atmosphere, that Lillian conceived their only child, a daughter born in 1949.

In the meantime, Jack continued to hit the streets, latching on to various characters. There was an old man named O'Connell, a drunk, who stayed with Jack and Lillian and occasionally shilled for Jack. O'Connell faithfully returned to the stores all the empty bottles the couple accumulated because of Jack's fondness for soda pop, and with the refunds bought bottles of cheap wine. Jack Walsh, another shill, also stayed with the Knebels from time to time. Then there was a sign painter, who billed himself as Pierre Lagrange. It was Lagrange who introduced Knebel to what might be called the tombstone gaff.

Knebel had stopped by Lagrange's shop one Sunday, just as he was leaving for a cemetery in New Jersey.

"What do you do there?" Knebel asked.

"Restore gravestones."

Lagrange explained that the surface of a marble tombstone is nonporous. However, when inscriptions of the deceased are cut into the marble, the porous interior of the stone is exposed. As time passes, the lettering loses its contrast with the surrounding marble. Lagrange, armed with fine paintbrushes and a bucket of white lead, would approach people at the graveyard and offer his services for restoring the lettering. He always made it seem that the job was intricate and demanded great artistic skill. As long as the customer remained at the grave site, Lagrange worked

slowly, using the fine brushes. But the moment the customer left, Lagrange slapped the white lead on with a broad brush. The lead soaked into the porous lettering, but remained fluid on the surrounding, nonporous marble surface, and a wipe with a cloth took care of the excess. The entire job took less than ten minutes.

"How much do you get?" Knebel asked.

"Depends. People think a lot of their tombstones. I can usually get three, maybe five, for a restoration. That's not bad for ten minutes. They don't usually stay around and watch. Some days I can pick up three or four jobs. Want to come along?"

"Sure." Knebel was short on cash, and had had a fight with Lillian. A day in the country with Lagrange was just what he needed. "Maybe I can scare up a few marks for you while you're working."

They went to the cemetery in Lagrange's car. Lagrange began working on a stone he'd been commissioned to do the previous weekend. Knebel watched for a few moments as Lagrange smeared on the white lead with a heavy, stiff-bristled brush and wiped off the excess with an old rag. It was a pretty good gaff, Knebel decided, and he surveyed the cemetery. There were many people there that Sunday afternoon, placing flowers in steel vases with long spikes, arranging wreaths on fresh graves, praying, sunning, reflecting on those no longer present. Knebel went to Lagrange's car and got his hat, a snappy rain model that made him look, according to him, "kind of dashing."

"Pardon me, sir, in your moment of grief," Knebel said to a middle-aged man standing at a grave. He took off his hat and held it to his breast.

"Yes?"

"I couldn't help but notice the beauty of the stone on this grave, sir. I'm in this business and naturally am aware of such things."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I'm employed by the Armstrong Monument Company over there." Knebel gestured to one of the several tombstone companies on the perimeter of the cemetery. He'd noticed the sign as he approached the man, and decided it would be as good a firm as any to "work" for. "On weekends, I do extra work on my own to support my family. My wife is pregnant."

"I see."

"What I was about to suggest, sir, was that you consider the rejuvenation of your stone. It's a lovely stone but time does take its toll. What I do on the weekends is rejuvenate stones so that the lettering again takes on its original beauty and clarity. You can see for yourself how the lettering on your stone has dulled with age."

The man looked at the lettering. Chances are it had lost some of its contrast with the surrounding marble, but even if it hadn't, the power of suggestion was at work.

"How much does it cost?" the man asked Knebel.

"Well, it does take a great deal of skill. I do this work for Armstrong all week, and I'm considered an expert. But I do need money for my family. Three dollars. And I assure you, sir, that when you again come to visit the grave, the difference will astound you."

The man considered the offer.

"I hate to see a truly beautiful stone such as this deteriorate," Knebel said. "It's a shame."

The man decided to go ahead with it. He gave Knebel three dollars, said a final prayer at the grave, and left. Knebel went to Lagrange, and told him of his success. He gave Lagrange the money. Lagrange returned half to him. While Lagrange slopped the white lead on the stone, Knebel went in search of other customers.

He found a few, but none as challenging as Robert J. McGrath, a recent widower. Knebel came across him as he stood at his wife's grave, which had not as yet settled and which was devoid of grass and other adornments.

"Pardon me, sir, in your moment of grief." Knebel's hat was at his breast. "I wonder if I might interrupt your meditation to discuss your beautiful stone with you." Knebel noticed that the stone bearing the name "Lucius McGrath" was new, and clearly did not need rejuvenation. He was about to suggest a new, miracle process of *protection* for tombstones when Mr. McGrath spoke.

"Is it about the engraving?"

"Yes, sir, it is. Are you a McGrath?"

"Yes. My wife Katherine was buried here only a few weeks

ago, next to my brother Lucius. I haven't gotten around to the engraving yet."

"Did you buy the stone from my firm?" Knebel pointed to the Armstrong sign.

"Yes, my family bought it when Lucius died."

Knebel explained that he worked for Armstrong and was doing weekend work to support his growing family.

"Are you an engraver?" McGrath asked.

"Yes, one of the few authorized to match existing engravings. I realize I'm quite young, but it's been in my family for generations."

Mr. McGrath seemed impressed. But Knebel was beginning to worry. He was getting in over his head. He'd never put a chisel to stone before, and he could visualize it shattering into millions of tiny pieces. His hope was that McGrath would pay the money and leave. If he insisted on staying, Knebel wasn't sure what he'd do.

"Have you had a price yet on the engraving?" Knebel asked.

"Yes, I have," McGrath replied, fussing with some flowers. "The man charged me thirty-five dollars when he did Lucius."

"That's a very reasonable price," Knebel said, not having any idea what a decent price was for such work. "I have charged as much as fifty, although I must admit that matching existing engravings comes higher. But since I am offering to do this on my own to supplement my income, I would do it for quite a bit less for you." At this point, Knebel was ready to charge ten dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. But his instinct took hold. "I'll do it for twenty dollars, Mr. McGrath."

He waited for a reaction. McGrath continued to fuss with the flowers. "Would you like me to do it?"

"When would you start?"

"Oh, in a few days. I'll come over on my lunch hour, get all the preliminary work done, and have it cut before next weekend."

McGrath looked up and winced. "I'd love to see it done today," he said.

"Today?"

"Yes. At least started. It would mean a great deal to me see Katherine's name on the stone."

Knebel had two choices. Either he could agree to start, or pass up the twenty dollars. It really wasn't much of a decision to make. "I'll have to get my tools," he told McGrath. "I'll be back in a moment." He went to Lagrange, who was smearing white lead on a stone Knebel had contracted for earlier in the day.

"Pierre, have you got a chisel and a ballpeen hammer in the car?"

"Why?"

"I've got a guy who wants me to cut his stone."

Lagrange stopped smearing and looked up at Knebel. "Don't be ridiculous, Jack. You can't cut stone."

"I know, I know. But he's willing to pay me twenty bucks. All I have to do is start cutting and he'll blow."

Lagrange shook his head and told Knebel where the tools were. Knebel got what he needed, including a chalk line and ruler. He returned to McGrath, who was now watering the flowers.

"Well, Mr. McGrath, I'm all set to get started. But I haven't had lunch. I think I'll run over and get a hamburger."

McGrath offered to get it for Knebel. Knebel declined and grimly went about measuring the scale of the existing lettering. He took his time, measuring and remeasuring, jotting the figures down on a small piece of paper.

"Katherine was a wonderful girl," McGrath said absently.

"I'm sure she was."

"Appreciate your wife, young man. Appreciate her while you have her."

"Oh, I do, Mr. McGrath."

McGrath watched as Knebel, no longer able to prolong the measuring routine, began chalking the line.

"The hardest thing is to meet with her family," McGrath said. "To sit and talk about Katherine with them is very upsetting. I'll be meeting them for dinner when I leave here."

Knebel became optimistic. All he had to do was to put off actually having to bang the chisel against the beautiful piece of marble before McGrath went to dinner. He began marking measurements on the stone, and snapped the chalk line against the vertical and horizontal marks. He wiped the chalk line off and started again.

"Trouble?"

"Oh, no. I just like to be exact."

"That's good."

Knebel looked in the direction where Lagrange had been working and saw his partner beckoning from behind a tall tombstone. "Excuse me, Mr. McGrath, one of my associates seems to be having a little trouble. I've been breaking him in on restoration techniques."

"What do you want?" Knebel asked Lagrange.

"Let's get out of here, Jack. We can get arrested for this."

"Nobody can arrest us for anything because I'm not going to do a fucking thing. Now lay off, will you!"

Knebel returned to McGrath. He resnapped the chalk lines and created a perfect box in which the name of Katherine C. McGrath and the pertinent dates could be engraved. He picked up the chisel and hammer and weighed them in his hands. He broke out in a cold sweat. He couldn't do it.

"A problem?"

"Oh, no. It's just that—well, I've done many of these in my young life and have seen the reaction of grief-stricken people. There is something about the emotional impact of seeing the first stroke with the hammer that causes most people to break down. I've seen people shed tremendous tears when I make that first cut. I wish to suggest to you that you not witness this event. When you come to visit next Sunday, you'll shed tears of joy at seeing your beloved Katherine's name engraved forever in this stone. But to stand here is—too emotional a moment."

Knebel thought he detected a tear in McGrath's eye. He pressed on. "May I suggest something, Mr. McGrath? I'd like very much to lead us in a moment of prayer, either silent or verbal. May I do that?"

"Yes." McGrath's voice was choked. Knebel stood and removed his hat. He pressed it to his breast and began: "God in heaven, who has seen fit to take the beloved Katherine C. McGrath from her beloved husband, look down on us this day and—" Knebel took a quick look at McGrath. The tears were rolling freely as he stood beside Knebel, his hat also at his breast, his head bowed. Knebel continued with the prayer. When he was finished, McGrath was sobbing openly.

"Let me walk you to your car," Knebel suggested, taking McGrath's elbow.

"No, I'll be all right. But I see what you mean. It is a rough moment. And you are a wonderful young man. Here." He handed Knebel twenty-five dollars, five more than they'd agreed upon.

"Next Sunday, drop me a note at Armstrong," Knebel said as McGrath began to walk away. "I'd like to hear from you." McGrath just nodded and continued walking. Knebel took the chisel, placed it against a loose rock on the ground, and struck it with the hammer. The sound pealed across the cemetery. McGrath quickened his walk and was gone.

4

"I have a bid of five for this quality watch, a seven-jewel beauty manufactured by Europe's finest craftsmen and featuring a precision sweep-second hand, luminous dial, raised jeweled numbers, and impeccable inner electronic elements. Do I hear six?"

"How many jewels?"

"I have no idea how many Jews are here tonight, sir, but if it concerns you, I suggest you find another place to buy quality merchandise."

As the fall of 1932 approached, the lure of the auction houses on Sixth Avenue became strong for Jack Knebel. He'd given them a great deal of thought, and although he was confident he could make more money on the street, there was a certain legitimacy offered by the houses, a legitimacy of place. Instead of packing up keesters and tripes at the first sign of the police or the first drops of rain, the auction houses offered him a place of business, an office.

"I remember watching an auction one afternoon on Sixth Avenue," Nebel recalls, "and being fascinated by the elegant manner and vocabulary of the auctioneer. I had just finished selling a gross of juice extractors and was killing time before the early evening rush. A guy came over to me—I think his name was Diamond—and suggested I come back at night and shill for the auctioneers. He told me he'd pay me a deuce or a trey—

two or three dollars a night. I came back the next three nights and shilled."

Shills at auctions are much the same as shills in the street. Their function is to help attract a crowd off the street and into the building, and once the auction begins, the shills usually start the bidding.

"The merchandise wasn't exactly as good as it was represented to be, but it wasn't bad considering what I'd been selling in the street. They sold razor blades and shoe laces and watches and radios and bracelets and rings. In fact, that's where I bought Lillian's belated engagement ring."

Knebel had noticed it in the jewelry case of the auction house, a dinner ring with four small, diamondlike jewels which became, in the hands of the auctioneer, "*diamonds with all the beauty, lustre, and life of four balls of brilliant fire.*" The ring also contained two green stones, politely referred to as emeralds. "*No. these stones are not as big as your head, but what they lack in size they make up for in beauty and prismatic brilliance.*"

"I'll give it to you for the C-line, Knebel," Mr. Diamond told him after Jack expressed interest in the ring. C-line meant the cost line. Twelve dollars.

"I don't think Lillian has it any longer," Knebel says of the ring, his first gift to his bride. "But I loved that ring, and loved Lil very much. I bought it with my heart."

One afternoon, during that first week of moonlighting at the auction house, Knebel set up his keester and began extolling the virtues of a new brand of razor blades with miraculous cutting edges that shaved you clean with a single downstroke. His location was a prime one; between the Woolworth Building and Stern's department store. He'd just sold out his supply when he was approached by a portly gentleman wearing a suit, vest, and expensive felt fedora.

"I've been watching you work," the man said. "How would you like to come work for me as an auctioneer?" He handed Knebel a card: City Liquidating Company, Morris Lieberman, President.

Knebel was familiar with the house from his travels up and down Sixth Avenue. He agreed to stop by the following morning. That night, after shilling at the other auction house, he went

home and told Lillian the news. She was as enthusiastic as he was; the prospect of a steady weekly check was a welcome one, not only for its obvious usefulness but because it indicated to the seventeen-year-old girl a step in the direction of security. Knebel told her what Lieberman had said: "If things work out, we'll buy your license and post your bond." An auctioneer's license cost a hundred dollars; the yearly renewal fee was twenty-five dollars. The bond required for all auctioneers in the city of New York was five thousand dollars.

"Why auctioneers had to be bonded is beyond me," Nebel muses. "If it was to guard against the man misrepresenting the merchandise, they should have required it of politicians." But there wasn't any cynicism in 1932 on the part of Jack and Lillian Knebel. Lieberman's offer meant a steady thirty-five dollars a week to start and later, hopefully, a red flag that would hang in front of the City Liquidating Company: Jack Knebel, *Licensed and Bonded Auctioneer*. The license and bond belonged to the auctioneer; he got to keep the red flag.

Sixth Avenue was referred to in those days as the Unemployed Western Front. Mingled among the auction houses and small mom-and-pop shops were a variety of employment agencies. It was the custom for unemployed men to rise early and make the rounds of these agencies, scanning the three-by-five cards thumbtacked at the entrance: dishwasher, floor scrubber, shirt presser. Each job demanded advance payment to the agency, the sums ranging from two to fifteen dollars, depending on the worth of the job. The cards came down fast every morning, and most men found themselves without a job after making the rounds. That left them on Sixth Avenue with the money in their pockets that was to go to an agency. This group comprised a large percentage of the auction houses' clientele. If there wasn't a job to boost the spirits, a bargain wasn't a bad substitute.

"They started me out sweeping floors and replenishing stock on the shelves," Knebel says. They also had him shill for the other auctioneers, one of whom was named Billy Solters. Knebel admired Solters's work. His admiration doubled when he learned Solters was being paid a hundred dollars a week. As far as Knebel was concerned, the president of the United States wasn't making that much.

One afternoon, with a crowd of over two hundred customers in the house, Solters got into a fight with Mr. Coles, Lieberman's partner. While they were in the back of the house arguing, Knebel stepped to the auctioneer's platform and began asking for bids on gross lots of "*fabulous, double-edged razor blades, each individually tested under Cooper-Huet lights and . . .*"

Solters came storming from the back and threatened to break Knebel's skull if he ever took over a tip again. Lieberman and Coles tore down Solters's red flag, ejected him from the premises, and allowed Knebel to work the afternoon. When he was through for the day, they took him into the back room and told him he wasn't great, but might work out. They hadn't planned to put him on the platform so soon, but they'd take a chance.

"How much?" Knebel asked.

"What do you mean how much? Thirty-five. What you're getting."

"I want more. Solters was getting a hundred."

"And you're Knebel and you get thirty-five. By the way, we have to get your license. But that name—Jack Knebel—it's no good. We get a lot of customers from the garment business. Mostly Jews. I think they'd like to feel they could come in and put one over on a Christian boy. You understand?"

"No."

"Knebel with a K sounds Jewish. You're not Jewish and we don't want you to sound Jewish. We'll make it Nebel, no K. And use John. John sounds Christian."

And that's the way Jack Knebel's first red flag read: John Nebel, Licensed and Bonded Auctioneer.

Nebel worked at City Liquidating through December of 1932 and proved himself an effective auctioneer. Further, he was enjoying the job so much that he had postponed asking for a raise. But with Christmas coming up, he needed extra money. He approached Coles (Lieberman was the tightfisted partner), who told him that he'd talk it over with Lieberman. Nebel waited a few days and again brought up the subject with Coles.

"Maybe after Christmas," Coles said. "Be patient. There'll be a Christmas bonus."

Buoyed by that thought, Nebel continued auctioning off the staples of City Liquidating—tapestry, china, shoe laces, razor

blades, shaving cream. There was also a Christmas special, a five-pound box of chocolates that sold for the flat price of a dollar.

December 23 was a big day at City Liquidating. The tip was larger than usual as people looked to pick up bargains for Christmas presents. Nebel finished his stint and gathered up the merchandise he'd bought for Lillian at the C-line. He waited around for his bonus. Finally, anxious to go home, he told Lieberman what he was waiting for.

"Oh, yeah. It's been so busy I forgot." He handed Nebel an envelope. Then, as an afterthought, he grabbed a box of the dollar chocolates off the shelf. "For the family, John," he said, giving him the candy. Nebel didn't wait to get outside to open the envelope. In it was a crumpled five-dollar bill. "This is the bonus?" he asked in the incredulous tone of voice that has destroyed hundreds of guests on his radio shows.

"You should be grateful," Lieberman said. "It hasn't been a good year. Besides, you're new. In a few years it'll grow."

"You cheap bastard, there won't be even another day!"

He stormed out of the auction house, the chocolates under his arm, the five dollars in his pocket. He was in a rage when he reached the apartment. Lillian tried to soothe him but he was beyond that. He took a bath in their chipped enamel bathtub, still complaining about his treatment by Lieberman. Irritable but clean, he sat in the living room and slipped into a quiet depression.

At nine that night there was a knock on the door. It was Coles. Nebel knew why he had come. He wanted Nebel back on the auction platform and would probably offer him a raise. But John Nebel was a showman, even in those early years. He asked Coles what he wanted.

"I want to talk some business with you, John."

"This is my home," Nebel said. "It is my castle. I don't conduct business in my home."

"It's a nice home, John," Coles said, surveying the clean but shabby room. "And if I were Lieberman I wouldn't blame you for telling me to get out. But me? When have we ever had a problem?"

In a grand gesture of forgiveness, Nebel offered Coles a chair.

He listened as Coles told him that he'd had a bitter fight with Lieberman over Nebel. Coles wanted to increase Nebel's salary, but Lieberman held firm. Finally, Coles prevailed. They would give Nebel a raise.

"How much?"

"How much. Always how much, John. A lot."

"How much?"

"Seventy-five a week."

"Solters got a hundred."

"And Lieberman is not an easy man. He wanted to give you fifty. Take the seventy-five."

Nebel did take it, and returned to work the following day. The relationship with Lieberman was strained. Coles's partner displayed a constant skepticism of Nebel's ability to auction, especially at seventy-five dollars a week. He passed comments from time to time during John's first day back: "The hotshot is back," and "Solters, he was *worth* a hundred," and "For seventy-five I could get the best in Atlantic City."

Lieberman's taunting of Nebel brought about an amusing display of his talents as an auctioneer. It occurred in January 1933, on a cold, blustery day that kept job hunters and customers away from Sixth Avenue. As Nebel stood in the doorway with Lieberman surveying the blowing rain and sleet, a couple came running down the street, clumsily jumped a large puddle, and burst past them into the store. The husband was wearing a comic souvenir hat of New York, and carried a shopping bag filled with other bounty from the city's souvenir shops. "Mind if we just wait here a few minutes?" he asked Lieberman. Lieberman shrugged. The couple began to browse among the shelves of the house, openly admiring a number of the items. The husband was especially impressed with the watch case. Nebel yelled across the room, "They just came in. A special purchase." The couple continued to browse. Lieberman leaned over to Nebel.

"All right, hotshot. A seventy-five-dollar auctioneer should be able to sell them a watch. Sell them a watch and you've got a tenner for a bonus."

Nebel accepted the challenge. He knew it would be tough without the usual excitement of a competitive bidding situation. It then occurred to him that the lack of people to bid against

the couple posed an even greater problem. It was a law that an item could not be sold at auction without at least one competitive bid. He had only a husband and wife with which to work, and it seemed unlikely that one would bid against the other. But he'd accepted the challenge and would go through with it.

"Where are you from?" Nebel asked the couple as he came up to them at the watch case.

"Dayton. Dayton, Ohio."

"Wonderful town. I've been there many times." He asked other questions and discovered the couple had three children back in Dayton, the husband worked in a manufacturing plant, and they were in New York on a one-week vacation.

Nebel removed a watch from the case and held it for the couple the way a nurse holds a newborn baby for the father to admire. "Isn't that a beauty?" He told the husband all about the watch's superior construction, delicate mechanism, and heavy use of jewels. The husband nodded in agreement with everything Nebel said, and even tried to get his wife to join him in appreciation. She muttered a few noncommittal comments and urged her husband to leave. Nebel took the husband by the arm and led him to the auction block.

"I thought you might be interested in how we conduct an auction at City Liquidating," he said, climbing onto the platform. "You see, by auctioning instead of selling directly, the customer benefits from a generally lower price. For instance, this watch. I know it's silly to even ask, but you'd obviously be pleased if you could have this watch for five dollars, wouldn't you?" Nebel watched the husband's reaction. He agreed that he would, indeed, be pleased.

"I knew that the minute I started talking to you, sir. You're obviously a man of intelligence, and the fact that you travel marks you as a man of curiosity."

The man smiled.

"Obviously, I can't let you have this watch for five dollars. But because you are a visitor to New York, I might allow you to have it at a cost below what it will go for tonight at the regular auction. What would you give me for this watch, sir?"

"I don't know. Five dollars, maybe—"

"Six? Would you give six? *Will* you give six?"

"Six? Sure. That's a good price for—"

"I have six. Do I hear seven? Ma'am, you share your husband's intelligence. You travel. Certainly you would give seven dollars for this exquisite watch that is a tribute to the European watchmaker's craftsmanship."

Nothing. A blank, vacant stare.

"I can't really believe, madam, that you would not pay only seven dollars for this watch. Can you believe it, sir?"

"Well, I—"

"Do I hear seven?" Nebel was desperate. He had to have that one competitive bid to legalize the auction. "Seven? Just seven dollars for this handsome, quality watch? *Seven! I have seven!* Do I hear eight?"

The husband and wife looked over their shoulders. All they saw was Harold Lieberman standing at the door with a smile on his face.

"Seven?" the wife asked, in her first show of animation. "Who said seven?"

"It was signaled to me by Mr. Lieberman, the owner and chief buyer for City Liquidating. He's the gentleman at the door. We occasionally have bids mailed into us from smart buyers all over the world. There is a seven-dollar, mailed-in bid on this watch. Seven-fifty, ma'am?"

"I—"

"It's yours for seven-fifty, ma'am. I'd hate to see you lose out on this fantastic buy for the sake of fifty cents to someone out of town, possibly someone right back in Dayton who would certainly have the last laugh on you."

"Seven-fifty," the wife said as Nebel locked her into the gaze from his blue eyes. She was surprised she'd said it.

"Sold!"

Lieberman paid Nebel the ten dollars. The story got around the auction business, and John Nebel, licensed and bonded, became included in the unofficial list of the best talkers in New York.

Nebel left City Liquidating in February 1933 for a job as auctioneer at a very large and successful auction house downtown. It was owned and operated by a man named Digby, who

paid Nebel a hundred dollars a week to be the number-three auctioneer behind two older, veteran talkers. Nebel was every bit as effective as the number one and number two men. He mostly worked nights, and took with him two of his most effective skills at City Liquidating—Lillian and his friend, Ken Billson, who would come after his day job at Western Electric and work opposite sides of the room with Lil. One hundred dollars a week, *inside*, represented a dream-come-true for Lillian. It did for Jack, too, for awhile. But then he felt there was no sense in limiting himself to the merchandise and tips found inside auction houses. It was time to go back outside during the day and try new gaffs, influence new tips, and within two months begin a business built around "*a miraculous new discovery that is guaranteed to relieve that common curse of the man and woman—the hot, sore, blistery, and despairing foot!*" Whether Sun Foot Remedies, the name of Nebel's home-creation, actually did soothe feet is somewhat irrelevant; although if it had, it would have been, for him, a departure in the direction of legitimacy. What is important is that it launched Nebel into a business for which he and Lillian traveled the country. And it brought him back together with his mother and father, a reunion that was to end in disaster for his mother and to create a personal hell for her son.

5

*“My mother! when I learned that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?” **

The law offices of Samuel List, attorney to the Knebel family, were located in Manhattan at Twenty-eighth Street and Fifth Avenue. Nebel kept in touch with List, and was informed of his family's activities through the attorney.

“I went to Sammy in the early spring of 1933 to see if he could help me raise money for Sun Foot Remedies. I had a chance to demonstrate the product in all the Grand stores and needed capital.”

At that time, Sun Foot Remedies involved just one product, a foot powder that was good for *everything*. Nebel developed it on his off-time from the auction house, and wanted to devote full time to it. He later expanded the line to include a corn remover, an athlete's foot medication, a foot freshener, a foot soap, and a foot bowl. The ingredients that went into the products are forgettable. The claims made for them would have piqued Ralph Nader's interest had he been crusading in 1933.

“Jack was always mixing things in our apartment,” Lillian says. “We had big galvanized pans all over the place and I was the

* William Cowper, “On Receipt of My Mother's Pictures”

official mixer. Lord knows what went into the foot powder. I think there was Selox, lots of it, from big bags; and alkalis. and a few chemicals. One, I remember, was called collodion." It's likely that collodion, a highly flammable and potent chemical, was used in the corn-remover product that was developed later.

"How much do you need?" List asked Nebel.

"About a thousand."

"I'll have to look around for an investor. I'll get right on it, Jack. Come back tomorrow at four and we'll talk further. I have someone in mind, and if he's interested, I'll have him join us."

When Nebel arrived at List's office the following day, he was stunned to see his stepfather, John Aloysius Knebel, who extended his hand and said, "It sounds like a good product, Jack. I'd like to be your partner." It had been a year since they last saw each other.

After the three men sat down and began discussing the business venture, Nebel asked, "What about Lillian?"

"What about her?"

"She's my wife and I love her."

"We're starting over, Jack. I know she's your wife. Your mother and I are willing to accept her as your wife. I promise you that."

With his stepfather's financial backing, Jack's business venture promised to blossom into an important and lucrative one. Sun Foot Laboratories, Inc., was chartered in 1933. The company leased the entire third floor in the Ardley Arcade, a U-shaped, three-story structure at Fifty-first Street and Third Avenue. The street floor housed numerous antique dealers; a photographer-acquaintance of Nebel's was on the second floor.

Because of his stepfather's wide business experience, Jack allowed him to assume overall management of the firm. Although he never asked, he took it for granted that he and Lillian would receive half the issued stock—fifty shares. That was a petty detail; his thoughts were taken up with his plans to market and promote Sun Foot Remedies.

"I think the market is out West, Jack," his stepfather said one night at a business meeting. "Why don't you and Lillian go out there and see if you can generate interest in the product?" The idea had more appeal for Lillian than for Jack. She was anxious

to travel. Jack was apprehensive about the move, but agreed to try it.

The couple took a Greyhound bus to Milwaukee. The laboratory and plant in New York were in full production, and had begun manufacturing some of the other products in the Sun Foot line. Nebel's initial foray into the Midwest was successful. After performing over fifty demonstrations of the products in department stores there, he returned with enough orders to insure the continuation of the business for at least six months. He and Lillian worked demonstrations around New York, too, and enjoyed equal success.

"Allow me to demonstrate before your very eyes the effectiveness of Sun Foot Corn Remover. Corns are the painful affliction of rich and poor, men and women, old and young. And Sun Foot Corn Remover, developed in the country's leading research laboratories, will, as you will see, give you i-n-s-t-a-n-t, b-l-e-s-s-e-d, p-e-r-m-a-n-e-n-t relief. You, sir, do you suffer from corns? [If he doesn't, Nebel keeps going until he finds someone.] Fine. Please remove your shoes. [Nebel has the man apply the solution right through his sock.] Now, sir, you appear to be an intelligent and honest human being—I'm confident you'll honestly tell me whether Sun Foot Corn Remover brings blessed relief to your corn, sir. That's it. . . . [Nebel waits with the rest of the tip for the man's reaction. As with other products, Nebel is using the power of suggestion. In hundreds of demonstrations for the corn remover, he never once had a subject who didn't agree that it brought instant relief to his corn.] Thank you, sir. . . . Come right up for your very own supply of . . ."

Nebel's mother began spending more time at the laboratory. She assumed a managerial role, and supervised the help that was needed to meet the demand created for the products by her son's sales efforts.

Surprisingly, in the midst of the hectic activity and promise of the foot-care business, John Nebel could not resist an occasional fling at a less substantial enterprise. He took off for five days with the photographer on the second floor and "kidnapped" in Westchester County, north of the city. "Kidnapping" was the term applied to a kind of door-to-door selling that still flourishes

today. Nebel went to substantial homes and introduced himself as the representative of a leading New York City modeling agency. He told the lady of the house that he and his photographer were looking for attractive suburban children to model in leading magazines. If there were children in the home, the mother was usually proud enough of them to allow their photographs to be taken. Nebel and the photographer returned the following day with prints.

"Unfortunately, ma'am, your child, although absolutely beautiful, is not exactly the type we were looking for. But since we're back in the area and you were so nice, I thought you'd enjoy seeing the test prints we took of your child." The mothers were, with few exceptions, impressed. If Nebel had asked a mother to purchase a picture, he would have met resistance. But it was the act of putting them back in the envelope and beginning to leave the home that invariably prompted the mother to ask if she could buy them.

"We don't usually do that, ma'am, but—"

Another form of kidnapping was to rent a pony from a local stable and offer neighborhood kids a free ride. The photographer took pictures, and Nebel obtained the children's addresses. Few mothers could resist buying the adorable photographs of their children on a pony.

"Things were going pretty well," Nebel says as he reflects on the beginnings of Sun Foot Laboratories. "The business looked like it was going to boom, and it was good to be back with my family again. Lillian was working at the lab along with my mother, and she seemed happy."

Lillian *was* happy. She was a pretty young girl married to a handsome young man who was about to make his mark in the world. Her days were filled with an active participation in a growing business, and she seemed now to have been accepted by her husband's parents, though she admits that Laura Knebel did not fully accept her, and probably never would. There was always some tension when she was with her mother-in-law at the lab, an absence of free exchange, a tacit recognition that there was a difference between them. The social gap between the Riverside Drive Knebels and the Yorkville Schuberts was wide. She realizes, in retrospect, that John's mother blamed her

for her son's failure to pursue a more academic and socially acceptable life.

Matters came to a head one afternoon when Lillian announced she was going downstairs for a cup of coffee. She hadn't eaten lunch, having worked right through the lunch period helping one of the hired girls, but she wasn't really hungry; she just wanted to get away by herself for a half hour.

"I'd think you'd have a little more respect for money," Mrs. Knebel said when Lil announced her innocuous plans.

"What do you mean?"

"There's no need to spend a nickel on coffee downstairs. We have coffee here, and milk and sugar. Why don't you have a cup of coffee here?"

"I just feel like going downstairs for awhile."

At this point Nebel entered the lab.

"Money isn't easy to come by these days," Nebel's mother was saying to Lillian. "But perhaps you don't care about money."

"Of course I care about money. I was just—"

"What the hell is this all about?" Nebel asked.

"You children are always complaining you don't have enough money. I was just pointing out to your wife that spending a nickel on coffee downstairs was unnecessary."

"I don't think it's any of your business. She works hard and should be able to buy a goddamn cup of coffee when she wants to."

As in most situations of this sort, the anger expressed does not always accurately reflect its true source. Nebel was releasing his growing annoyance at his mother's inability to welcome Lillian wholeheartedly into the family. As for his mother, her comments about a five-cent cup of coffee stemmed from her lingering disappointment in Lillian as her son's marriage choice.

"I've had it!" Nebel exploded. "We're through."

His mother didn't respond. She turned to the job she'd been doing when the issue was raised and ignored the couple. Nebel grabbed Lillian by the arm and led her from the lab. They both had a cup of coffee downstairs and went home to their apartment.

That evening, John went back to the lab and confronted his stepfather, who was alone in his office.

"I'm through," he announced. "I want to square up accounts right now and have done with it."

His stepfather remained as calm as his mother had been. "All right, Jack, whatever you say. Now what do you mean by squaring accounts?"

"I want my share of the stock in Sun Foot."

"All right." The elder Knebel reached behind him and took a corporate binder from the shelf. He opened it and removed a blank certificate. Slowly, he wrote in the number of shares, signed his name as an officer of the corporation, and affixed the corporate seal to the certificate. He pushed it across the desk to his son. John picked it up and read it.

"Thirty-five shares?"

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"You bet there is! I deserve fifty shares. Half."

His stepfather maintained his executive posture. "I'd like to point out to you, Jack, that as the investor in the corporation, I should have a controlling interest. Don't you agree?"

Nebel felt small in the presence of his stepfather. He wanted desperately to conduct himself in as businesslike a manner as the older Knebel, but found it difficult. He sat quietly for a moment, collecting his thoughts. It was not unreasonable to him that the man with the money in a business should have the controlling interest.

"All right, Dad, I agree. You should have fifty-one shares. That would leave me forty-nine. Give me the other fourteen shares."

His stepfather smiled. It was a warm, understanding smile. "Do you feel it's wrong for your mother to have shares, Jack? She's worked very hard, you know. I would hope you'd be happy to see her receive the other fourteen shares."

"That's all right with me," John said. "But let's make her really happy and give her twenty-eight shares. You give fourteen and I'll give fourteen."

"I couldn't do that, Jack. I wouldn't have controlling interest if I did that. You can understand that, can't you?"

It was becoming more difficult for John to act in the manner he wished. He was hurt. He wanted John Aloysius, a man he looked up to and admired, to give in, to recognize his request and

honor it. He made a couple of stabs at further explaining his case, falling back each time on the fairness of each of them giving something to the mother. His stepfather spared him another attempt by leaning across the desk and saying, "Jack, I'd like to tell you a story."

"Does it have to do with this company?"

"No, but it's a story I think you'll want to hear and perhaps tell to your children. Will you listen?"

Nebel was in no mood for stories. But he agreed to listen. It would give him time to think, time to mount another argument concerning the stock. His stepfather began by leaning back in his swivel chair and rubbing his eyes. After a deep breath, he began:

"There was a man a number of years ago who was totally blind. He was married to a lovely girl who died giving birth to their firstborn. She didn't even know she'd given birth to a son. Because this man was somewhat incapacitated due to his blindness, he wanted to arrange for the very best care for his infant son. Some friends told him about a young lady, a bright young lady who was attending medical school. She'd been studying medicine for almost two years, but had run out of money to continue. This sightless man arranged to meet her. He offered to put her through the rest of her schooling. He offered her a room, free of rent, in his house. In return, she would oversee the care of the baby.

"About a year later, the sightless man fell in love with the medical student and married her; but in the fourth year of their marriage, he died. And from his deathbed, he asked his wife to take good care of his son, and to never, never let him know that she was not his real mother."

John Nebel listened to the story and yet did not hear. His father's words were strained through his own thoughts of the stock he felt was due him.

"It was very difficult for this young woman to care for her husband's child. A member of his family attempted to take the boy away from her. Her dead husband's brother offered to marry her, but she refused. She fought every attempt to separate her from the child. Finally, she was able to legally adopt him. Then she met a businessman and fell in love. They married and

together brought up the boy. She sacrificed a great deal for this boy. So did the businessman. That boy is about your age now, Jack. About twenty-one. I only tell you this story to make you realize that many times, without our being aware of it, people make great sacrifices for us."

As far as John was concerned, the story seemed unrelated to the events at hand. He looked at his father and sarcastically asked, "Are you through? It was a very touching story and all, but I'm still wondering about my fourteen shares."

"Jack would you be interested in knowing who the woman is in the story?"

"If you want to tell me. But I don't really care."

"You call her Mother, Jack."

"I don't understand."

"The lady in the story, the medical student who cared for that young boy, is the woman you call Mother today—Laura Zimmerman Knebel. You were the boy."

"Jack came home that night and cried like a baby," Lillian remembers. "He didn't leave the apartment for two days, crying sometimes, talking sometimes. He always suspected something was not quite right about his family situation. I remember when we were going together he talked about when his father died. He knew, of course, that John Knebel was not his real father. He remembered being held up by a neighbor to see his real father in the coffin; and he also had a vague memory, that he thought may have been just a dream, of being asked how he liked his new mother. That stayed with him. But I guess suspecting and being told are two different things. He took it very hard."

6

*“Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?”* *

In Chicago, in 1909, John Zimmerman married Edith Anrand. It was a marriage of two very attractive people: Edith, oval-faced, dark-haired, pensive; John, tall, blonde, heroic.

Two days after the wedding, John became ill. The illness, undiagnosed, left him permanently blind.

On June 11, 1911, two years later, Edith Zimmerman gave birth to the couple's first child, a son. The birth occurred at two in the afternoon; by six, Edith was dead. On July 4 the baby was baptized into the Protestant faith and named John.

In late August of the same year, the blind father met Laura, a second-year medical student whose surname, coincidentally, was also Zimmerman. Concerned with the raising of his son, which, to date, had been undertaken by grandparents and neighbors, the father asked Laura Zimmerman if she would take on that responsibility in return for her college tuition, room, and board. She accepted his offer. John Zimmerman hired a full-time nurse, and Laura Zimmerman moved into the house and supervised the care of the baby.

* William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*

By the following spring, John and Laura had fallen in love, and on July 22, 1912, they were married. It was a happy marriage. Laura completed her education and received a medical doctor's degree. John, who had been established in a small business prior to his blindness, continued its profitable operation until his death in November 1916, when young John was five and a half years old. On January 18, 1917, Laura Zimmerman, true to the promise she had made to her husband on his deathbed, legally adopted the boy, and resolved never to reveal to him that she was not his real mother.

In the fall of 1917, Laura met a businessman named John Aloysius Knebel, whom she married a year later.

In the summer of 1920, young John (now carrying the Knebel name), then ten and a half years old, woke up one morning blind. There was no explanation for it. His mother took him to a leading ophthalmologist in Chicago. He examined the boy, and talked with his mother.

"I had a case similar to this about ten years ago," the ophthalmologist told her. "Sudden blindness. No medical explanation, at least none that I could discover." Laura Knebel's suspicions were correct. She asked the patient's name.

"Zimmerman. John Zimmerman, I believe." Young John Knebel's real father.

The boy's blindness lasted almost a year. It was most likely psychosomatic. The death of his father, himself blind, had left a deep-seated impression on him. He recalls certain events surrounding his father's death that also led to his adult fascination with psychic phenomena, a fascination that dominated so many of his earlier radio shows on WOR.

"We lived in Chicago, but when my father got sick and died, we were visiting my grandparents in Kilbourne, Wisconsin, which is now called Wisconsin Dells. They'd taken my father to a hospital in Oshkosh. He had apoplexy. As far as I was concerned, a hospital was where you went to get better. People always came home better from hospitals. I remember sitting in my grandmother's kitchen with my mother, who asked my grandmother to read the tea leaves. My grandmother didn't want to read them, but Mother kept insisting. She handed the drained cup to my grandmother, who began studying the pat-

terns of the moist leaves. She didn't say anything for a few minutes, just stared into the cup. Finally, she looked at my mother and said, 'I see a long black hearse being pulled by four black horses.' I'll never forget the look that came over my mother's face. I started to cry. My grandmother came over and put her arms around me, but my mother just sat there, gazing at the wall. It wasn't a minute later that someone started banging on the kitchen door. It was a neighbor who'd received a call from the hospital in Oshkosh—my grandmother didn't have a phone. I didn't know what was happening or why, but all of a sudden we were packing our bags and getting on a train.

"It was a Catholic hospital, and I recall sitting in a room with a priest. I guess my mother and grandmother were with my father. The priest talked to me for a long time. I don't remember much of what he said, but I can never forget the violin music that was playing in another room. It was just loud enough to be audible, and had a haunting quality. I found out years later it was "Caprice Viennois, Opus 2," composed and played by Fritz Kreisler.

"When the priest finished with me, I was taken to my dad's hospital room. He looked very tired. I sat in a big stuffed chair next to his bed and he put his hand on mine. I fell asleep. When I woke up, all curled up in that chair, my father's bed was empty. The priest came in and told me my father had gone to heaven, and had asked that I be a good boy.

"The funeral was held in Kilbourne. I was told to stay upstairs in the house as much as possible, but my Aunt Martha decided I should have one final look at my father. I'd seen him in the casket before, but this was to be the final visit before they took him away. She lifted me up and held my face a foot away from my father's face. Someone switched on the victrola in the next room. Of all the records available to them, they'd chosen Fritz Kreisler's rendition of "Caprice Viennois." I cried.

"It was about three years later—I was about nine—and my mother had just returned from a shopping trip to downtown Chicago. She brought a surprise, a new phonograph. It was enough of an event to invite a few neighbors over to celebrate, the way people did when they had the first TV set on the block. I enjoyed the company along with my mother until my bedtime.

I went to my room, still hearing the laughter downstairs, and was just dozing off when I heard it coming from the living room—the same violin piece by Fritz Kreisler. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. There, framed in the doorway, was a man. My father. He smiled at me and said. ‘I must go away now, son. Take good care of your mother. I miss you.’ He was gone.”

Long John Nebel has always been skeptical of guests on his radio programs who claim participation in psychic happenings. He probes, at times ruthlessly, to find the weakness in their stories, the inconsistency, the flaw. He claims few experiences himself, the preceding story being the only memorable one. Real or imagined, the incident left its mark, and it manifests itself in much of what makes up the public and private figure of Long John Nebel. An obsession with death, a keen interest in the psychic world, a constant search, at times very public via the airways, for what rests inside him; these, among other things, are part of the Nebel story.

“What was the first thing you ever sold?” someone asks Long John Nebel during a commercial break on his show at WNBC.

“Firecrackers. In Chicago. It was the first time I was ever arrested, too.”

Jack was thirteen when he became friendly with a kid named Jimmy Nehegan, sixteen, whose family operated a successful carpet business in Chicago. Jimmy could legally drive, and had the use of one of the family cars.

One morning in June 1924, Jack’s stepfather announced he was going to Milwaukee on business. With all due regard for the sensitivities of the citizenry of Milwaukee, it should be pointed out that Milwaukee is, for all practical purposes, a suburb of Chicago. The elder Knebel often went to Milwaukee on business, taking one of the six daily trains that connected the cities. This particular morning he was running late, and wished to catch a train leaving from the North Shore Station. He offered Jimmy Nehegan three dollars to drive him. Jimmy was delighted, as was Jack, who looked forward to the ride.

As the boys headed back towards the city, they noticed a roadside stand where fireworks were being sold in anticipation of the Fourth of July. Fireworks were illegal in the city of Chicago,

but suburban roads were dotted with such stands. Knebel suggested they use the money his stepfather had given Jimmy to buy fireworks. "We can sell them for a profit," he said.

They bought three dollars worth of fireworks, including a couple of especially loud "dago bombs," and went to a local ball field where many kids were playing. They laid out the fireworks on the hood of Nehegan's car, and Jack set off one of the dago bombs. The noise captured the attention of the kids in the field, and they came over to the car. Within twenty minutes, Knebel and Nehegan had sold out the fireworks at a fifty percent markup. They had six dollars. A quick trip back to the suburbs resulted in the purchase of six dollars worth of cherry bombs, sparklers, whiz-bangs, lady crackers, and sons-of-guns. They went to another ball field, and sold out their supply.

The next morning, Jack and Jimmy bought twelve dollars worth of fireworks. By the end of the day, they had sixty dollars between them. Nehegan wanted to split up the money, but Knebel saw bigger things in store for the young entrepreneurs. There didn't seem to be any reason why they couldn't continue to double their money. Jack had often heard his stepfather talk of pyramiding money in business.

"We'll keep pyramiding, Jimmy," Jack said. Nehegan didn't know what that meant, but bowed to Knebel's suggestion. "You go out tomorrow morning and buy sixty dollars worth of fireworks. I'll stay here and make signs."

The Knebels lived in a large, airy, first-floor apartment in the exclusive Roger's Park section of Chicago. There was a big sun porch at the back of the apartment. That's where Jack Knebel set up his sign-making shop. He used large sheets of brown paper, and the chalky white paint popular with butchers in those days to advertise specials. His work on the first sign was interrupted by Jimmy's return. Jack went out and helped him haul in sixty dollars' worth of illegal merchandise. Then the boys went back to work on the signs.

The next interruption was the ringing of the doorbell.

"Who is it?" Jack asked through the closed front door.

"The police."

"My mother and father aren't home."

"We'd like to speak to Jack Knebel."

"That's my father. He isn't—"

"We'd like to speak to you, son."

"Just a minute."

Knebel ran to the back of the apartment and told Nehegan what was happening. Nehegan grabbed an armful of fireworks and left through the back door, leaving Knebel to shove what fireworks he could into a kitchen closet, and to tear down the signs that were hanging up to dry. Those chores completed, he left by the back door and came around to the front of the building. Two policemen were standing patiently at the door, their squad car parked at the curb.

"Are you the Jack Knebel who's been selling firecrackers?" one of the policeman asked. Knebel admitted he was. "You'll have to come with us," the other policeman said. Knebel was very frightened. "And you'll have to give us any fireworks you have."

Knebel went into the house and returned with the fireworks, minus those Nehegan had taken with him in his escape. He got in the car with the policemen and was driven to the local precinct house. His stepfather was called, and came down and picked up his son.

"They were really nice to me," Nebel reflects. "They talked about the electric chair and things like that, but they treated me good. I think they wanted to scare me. My dad got me and he was great. He wasn't harsh with me, just laughed it off. Of course, the police did keep the fireworks. I guess their kids had a good time with them on the Fourth."

There wasn't any need for Jack Knebel to work as a teenager. His parents were generous with him, and he was never without a pocketful of spending money. Still, he began to pursue various enterprises that left him less and less time for the normal pursuits of boys his age. He did become interested in electronics, and built a number of crystal radio sets, one of which won him first prize in a school competition. But his real interest was in merchandising, sales, and advertising. He found that he could buy paring knives at Woolworth's for fifteen cents and sell them door-to-door for thirty-five cents. He did the same with pots and pans, buying them at a discount house and selling them in his neighborhood at an impressive markup. Whether such in-

terests are genetic is speculative. In any case, his exposure to the business of selling was a constant one; his real father had been in business, and John Aloysius Knebel, his stepfather, was a salesman through and through.

At one time, when Jack was about eight years old, John Aloysius Knebel traveled the Midwest for a magazine he had started, *Automotive Electrical Engineer*. Although he carried the title "editor," he was, for all practical purposes, the magazine's only salesman. He visited service stations and automotive dealers and sold them subscriptions to the magazine, which was a respected publication in its field, and cost five dollars a year, or ten dollars for three years. It was a lucrative business, earning Knebel as much as a hundred and fifty dollars a day. He was a flamboyant man, and he took his family with him on many of his Midwestern swings, housing them in the best hotels and feeding them in the best restaurants. Jack often accompanied his stepfather as he visited his customers, and watched with fascination as he bantered with the service-station owner or dealership manager, made small talk, told a joke or two, and openly admired a passing woman. He remembers his stepfather as being a tall and imposing gentleman who wore his clothes well and was never without something intelligent to say. His stepfather was highly attractive to women, and John assumes he returned their attention. Bald, and developing a paunch, the elder Knebel possessed, nevertheless, a sexual magnetism of the kind that is evident in his stepson, Long John Nebel who, at sixty-two, is tall and trim, and has an appeal to female guests on his show that is like an electrical pulse that jumps the gap between them. Others in the studio can feel it. Usually, the pulse comes from the woman as a sexual charge. For Nebel, it is more often the reaction of a tolerant suitor, who enjoys the romantic implications of a flirtation. There is no simple sexual situation for John Nebel. Sex comes after romance has been allowed to flourish.

"I love the pursuit, the courtship, the romantic agonies. When all that is there, sex can follow naturally."

"John is the great WASP of all time," author Jackie Susann comments. "He's so straight about so many things, especially women."

I asked Miss Susann if she found Nebel sexually attractive.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "He's a very sensual man."

"Did you ever have an affair with John Nebel?" I asked, responding to rumors to that effect. Miss Susann's husband, producer Irving Mansfield, had dozed off in a chair during my interview with his wife. He woke up at this question and answered it.

"That rumor started when John plugged Jackie's book, *Valley of the Dolls*, so hard. There was nothing to it." Miss Susann nodded her agreement.

There have been other women who, as guests of the Long John Nebel Show, felt this sexual spark. One is Helen Gurley Brown, editor of *Cosmopolitan* and author of the bestselling book, *Sex and the Single Girl*. She commented to me during an interview, "I found John terribly attractive. I'm not so stuffy that I can't find married men attractive. He's really a very dishy guy. And I assumed he was married for a long time, probably with a wife stashed away in Hackensack, New Jersey, or someplace else. I eventually discovered he wasn't married, and that Terry was interested in him." The Terry referred to by Miss Brown is Terry Garrity, known as "J," the author of *The Sensuous Woman*. Terry Garrity was more than interested in Long John Nebel. She was in love with him, and he with her. Their affair lasted only a few months, but was a torrid one. Long John is one of the people to whom *The Sensuous Woman* is dedicated, and a chapter deals with a broadcasting personality who, admits Miss Garrity, is Long John Nebel.

After two years, John Aloysius Knebel decided to abandon the magazine in favor of a position as advertising manager and vice president of the Curtis Candy Company. Later Curtis assigned him the task of managing its newly acquired distributor, Judd and Spencer in Milwaukee. For a while, he ran the distributorship from his home in Chicago, but eventually he moved the family to Milwaukee.

The summer before the move, Jack and his mother summered in Kilbourne, Wisconsin, with his grandmother. Jack's position with the other youngsters of Kilbourne was strong. He was a big-city boy, a little hipper than the others. He was tall for thirteen. He'd traveled extensively with his father and missed a lot of school, an enviable situation in the minds of the children of Kilbourne. His tale of going blind, embellished for effect,

fascinated his summer chums. And while the others had been studying, Jack Knebel had been out making a score with firecrackers, paring knives, and pots and pans. All these assets overcame his lack of athletic ability. The other kids accepted the tall, pale, skinny city kid as a big-time operator who could teach them something worthwhile, something more useful than "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic." Jack Knebel even regaled the boys with stories of his sexual conquests in Chicago. He was lying; girls were as much of a nuisance to him at the time as they were to other boys his age. But his tales were spellbinding, and further established him as someone to be respected.

The arrival of a circus in Kilbourne generated as much enthusiasm as it would in any other town. Naturally, only the one-ring circuses played there, but they were welcomed as though they were all the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey red and blue units rolled into one. Jack Knebel had seen the big circuses in Chicago (another feather in his Kilbourne cap), but the arrival of the smaller unit somehow held out an even greater fascination for him. Its smallness brought it closer to him. And he very much wanted to be close to a circus. His visits in Chicago had piqued his interest in the world of high-flying trapeze artists, wild animals, and tightrope walkers. But what most captured his imagination were the men and women who talked to the audience at the ten-in-one shows, the attractions more commonly referred to as "freak shows." Jack was a realistic boy in many ways. Although he joined others his age in mentally transporting himself to the trapeze platform or to the high wire, he knew he'd never become an athletic circus performer. But he knew he could *talk*, and to be up there in front of a crowd, dressed in a striped blazer and straw hat, surrounded by the gaily colored circus tents and the energy of the midway was, to him, akin to going to heaven.

The Kilbourne boys had been on hand to greet the one-ring circus year after year, and they knew all the tricks for getting in free and for being in the right place at the right time to be chosen to help water and feed the animals, or to meet the circus performers. Jack was with them at five o'clock on the Saturday morning the circus arrived in town. It had rolled in on trucks, and was setting up on a school lot that was rented to

visiting shows. He watched as most of the other boys helped unfurl canvas, unload trucks, and care for the animals. That sort of work didn't appeal to him. He wandered around until he came upon the show's wild animal trainer—a dirty, unshaven man with a mouth to match. Jack watched as the trainer entered a cage in which the star animal in his act was housed, the "ferocious, man-eating lion from the jungles of Africa." The lion seemed tired; he lay on the floor of his cage yawning and stretching.

"Are you going to feed him?" Jack asked the trainer.

"Shit, that son of a bitch eats more than I do. Here. Give him this." He handed Jack a piece of meat, which Jack held at arm's length because of its smell. The trainer, annoyed, yanked it from Jack's hand and went into the cage. He dropped the meat at the lion's paw, grabbed a broom from a corner of the cage, and began sweeping. The lion played with the meat, then pushed it aside, and rolled over on his back. When the trainer had swept all of the cage except that portion occupied by the lion, he kicked the big cat and muttered, "Move, you son of a bitch." The lion lazily crawled to another corner and allowed his master to sweep the place he'd vacated.

Knebel couldn't help laughing at the scene. The circus posters distributed around Kilbourne featured an animal trainer in a dashing red uniform fearlessly holding a whip and chair against the charge of a ferocious lion. He was billed as the "World's Greatest Wild Animal Trainer." Somehow, the trainer didn't seem very great at that moment. Knebel hung around the cage for another half hour, and at one point, reached through the bars and patted the lion's paw. The animal sighed. When the trainer invited him inside the cage to help him clean it, Jack went in frightened but came out wearing a confident smile. The lion had nuzzled him, just as kittens from a neighbor's house had done back in Chicago.

"Naturally, when I told the other kids about it, they didn't believe me," Nebel recalls. "But I didn't care. Of course, I didn't tell them that the lion was on its last legs and wouldn't hurt a frog. Even though they said they didn't believe me, they weren't really sure. It was great for the ego."

Armed with the confidence that can only come from meeting

and conquering a lion, Jack Knebel strutted around the lot. He was standing watching the assembling of the ten-in-one show tents when he overheard someone talking about a sick clown. He wasn't a performing clown, just one of four or five who drove a chariot in the typical circus parade that was to be held downtown at three that afternoon and in the opening spectacular that begins every circus performance.

"Is the owner around?" Jack asked someone. He was. Knebel went to him and suggested he take the sick clown's place in the parade and opening number.

"How old are you?" the owner asked.

"Seventeen."

"You ever work a circus before?"

"Yup. In Chicago. Last year. Chariot driver."

He was hired. There wasn't any pay, just the glory of dressing up in a purple clown costume and guiding a chariot through the streets in front of the whole town, including his summer friends. His face was covered with white greasepaint, and a bulbous nose and large ears were added. His chariot, pulled by a beautiful white horse, was decorated in 24-carat goldleaf.

As he drove the chariot in the opening spectacular that night, the applause was all for him, and he straightened to its call. It was a packed house; the owner was in a good mood. Jack sought him out late in the performance and after engaging him in fifteen minutes of chatter, suggested that he travel with the circus for the next few weeks until the sick clown regained his health. The owner agreed, making sure Knebel understood there would be no pay anywhere along the tour. That didn't bother Knebel. He accepted the terms of the employment as the price one pays to get started in show business.

The next town on the show's itinerary was Baraboo, Wisconsin, twenty miles south of Kilbourne, and the original home of Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. Before he could travel those twenty miles, he had to travel the long road of inevitable objections that would be thrown in his way by his mother and grandmother. Laura would certainly consider the rowdy life of a circus no place for her son. His grandmother, a strict Methodist and a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, considered circuses little better than card-

playing, drinking, dancing, and chasing girls (all the things his grandfather had enjoyed). Jack instinctively did the right thing; he called his stepfather in Chicago. His stepfather considered the circus opportunity a wonderful experience for a young boy, and felt strongly enough about it to overcome the wails of the women of the house. There was one stipulation, however. Jack could remain with the show only two weeks. But Jack knew that if he survived the two weeks, he could call his stepdad and lengthen the stay. It worked out that way, and he remained with the circus the entire summer, going on the payroll after the first week.

Of all the experiences Jack Knebel took with him from that marvelous summer with the circus, one remained and helped shape his later interest. (He also had his first sexual encounter while on the road. It occurred with a circus groupie in Wausau, Wisconsin, but can't be counted as having prompted an interest in sex. The interest in sex preceded the experience.)

"I became fascinated with the show's telepathist, Lady Olivia," Nebel says, "and with her talker—the guy up front who gathered the tip and sold them on buying a fortune from Lady Olivia. It was great. Really great."

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd appreciate it if you'll now gather around this platform. It is a rare privilege and a great honor for me to present our star attraction this season, the incredible Lady Olivia. Lady Olivia can read your mind without the aid of any mechanical or electrical equipment, or personal contact. . . . She was the seventh born in a family of seven children. She was born on the thirty-first day of October, the day we celebrate as Halloween. At the age of seven, Lady Olivia was able to answer her mother's questions and execute her mother's desires prior to the time that they were orally stated. At the age of fourteen she had completed her high-school education. On her graduation day, she was giving the valedictory speech when all of a sudden she stopped. For a period of time that seemed hours, although it was just a matter of seconds, there was a complete silence in that high-school auditorium in Ashtabula, Ohio. Members of the audience began to feel sorry for this little girl who evidently had forgotten the rest of her speech. And just then little Olivia said in a quivering, faint voice, 'There's a bad wreck that's going to

happen at the railroad crossing in just a few minutes'. . . Now a very large percentage of the audience that day had heard reports of Olivia's telepathic ability. This startling announcement therefore caused great unrest and concern for everyone. Seconds later a blanket of silence covered the auditorium. In the distance could be heard the roar of an oncoming train. And then—a tremendous crash was heard; the whining, screeching sound of the engine and the freight cars coming to a halt. And rather than give you any more of the gruesome details, let me say that Lady Olivia as a child of fourteen, had predicted, minutes before, one of the most tragic train wrecks in the annals of railroad history that occurred in that small community in Ohio. . . . Yes, the lady whom I will have the pleasure of introducing in a few minutes—the lady who has amazed kings and queens, the lady who has astounded three former presidents of the United States, the lady who has baffled scientists in leading universities around the world—the lady is Lady Olivia, the world's greatest mentalist!"

Lady Olivia usually made her entrance to enthusiastic applause. Her husband, the talker, whose reputation with a bottle rivaled his wife's reputation as a mentalist, entered the crowd and gathered information from it—birthdates, names, and other facts "unknown to Lady Olivia." He sent back the information to her by means of a verbal code, thus enabling her to astound the members of the tip.

Jack Knebel became Lady Olivia's father confessor, evidence of his ability to appear older than he was. They spent long hours together, and she taught him all the intricacies of performing a mentalist act, knowledge he was to put to later use when he traveled with Lillian and their own mind-reading act. He was fascinated with Lady Olivia, and was a bright and motivated pupil.

September rolled around and Jack Knebel returned to Chicago and his family. He was convinced of three things: he wanted a career in show business, he wanted to learn more about the occult, and he wanted no further part of formal schooling. For him, the selling of an idea, illusion, or product to a crowd was the purest form of self-expression. He peddled pots and pans door-to-door, and attended school less and less frequently.

Finally, he dropped out after completion of the eight grade. There didn't seem much sense in sitting in a stuffy schoolroom when there was such a classical buck to be made in the business world. As it turned out, his decision was a good one in light of his stepfather's coming decline in that same business arena.

It was at this time that the elder Knebel moved the family to Milwaukee to be closer to the candy distributorship he'd taken over for Curtis. The business never caught on. But before it failed, Jack had a chance to work with his stepfather, who taught him a little about decorating store windows. He also worked one summer with a professional window decorator hired by the older Knebel. They created window displays for candy stores serviced by the distributorship, and young Jack became adept with a magnetic hammer, a mouthful of tacks, and crepe paper.

When his business folded, John Aloysius Knebel, candy executive, moved to New Haven, Connecticut, as advertising manager for the Bradley Smith Candy Company, the originators of the lollipop. The job didn't last too long, and Knebel moved the family back to Chicago.

"I was aware that things weren't going too well with my stepdad," Nebel recalls. "My folks never discussed it with me, but you could feel we were into bad times. The cuts of meat were different, and potatoes were more plentiful. My mother, who almost always had household help, started doing more of the daily chores herself. She mentioned to me once that she was afraid to have an outsider handle our precious china and glass ornaments. I'm not sure whether I believed her then or not. She was always the lady, full of pride."

Young Jack never knew where his stepfather went each day after their return to Chicago. He wasn't employed, but he left the house each morning like a man with a job. Jack, now that he was no longer attending school, spent his days dreaming up ways to make money. There was no pressure put upon him to do this, and he kept whatever he made.

One afternoon, as he lolled around the apartment, he noticed an advertisement in the morning paper that promised great profits for anyone interested in selling the "revolutionary new

merchandising aid," bulb flashers. The gentleman running the ad operated from his apartment, and was the local distributor for the flashers. He was looking for men and women to buy the product from him at a discount and sell directly to local stores at a profit.

Knebel hustled over to the man's apartment and was given a sales talk about the product. It was a small, buttonlike device that, when inserted in a light socket and secured with the bulb, caused the bulb to flash on and off as the tiny thermostat inside reacted to the heat from the electrical flow. One flasher cost a dollar; two dozen cost fifty cents apiece; six dozen went for forty cents each. Knebel had only a few dollars in his pocket. He bought one unit for demonstration purposes, confident that on his first day he could get orders for at least six dozen. With the money thus obtained, he could then make bulk purchases to fill the orders he'd already taken and to sell to other customers.

He stopped in at a neighborhood tailor shop on his way back to the apartment. The tailor listened patiently as the boy extolled the virtues of the flasher.

"You put one of these in every socket on your sign outside, Mr. Gualairi, and the bulbs will flash on and off just like a movie billboard. It will attract attention to your store and increase business."

"How much are they, Jack?"

"A dollar."

"I have twenty bulbs on my sign. That's twenty dollars."

"That's nothing, Mr. Gualairi. You'll make more than that in new customers in a week."

"Jack, you're a nice boy but I can't buy your merchandise just because I like you and your family. I can buy bulb flashers for a quarter. Why should I pay you a dollar?"

"A quarter?"

"Yes. Wait a minute. I'll show you." The tailor went into the back and came out with a magazine. He handed it to Jack at an opened page. Sure enough, there was an ad by a New York firm, for bulb flashers costing twenty-five cents each.

Jack thought on his feet. He had assumed that the flashers

offered by his distributor were unique and that he'd stumbled upon one of the great electronic discoveries. But he couldn't let this first potential customer know of his naiveté.

"Mr. Gualairi, I'm well aware of those flashers offered in the magazine. But did you notice that those inferior flashers are good only with sixty-watt bulbs? And did you see any guarantee mentioned in the ad? My flashers carry a year's guarantee. And they're rated up to one-hundred watts. I know you're a man who appreciates quality. I can see that in the work you do. That's why I think you—"

"Jack, maybe your flashers are better than the ones in the magazine. But even if they cost a dime I wouldn't buy them. I like my bulbs to stay on. When my bulbs are on, they light up the name Gualairi. I like that. No flashers, Jack. But thank you for stopping in."

Depressed, but not defeated, Jack stopped in a few more stores on his way home. He struck out in each one.

That night, while his parents were out visiting friends, Jack sat around the apartment leafing through magazines. But he had trouble keeping his mind on anything. The potentials of the flashers kept coming back to him. He tried to analyze the objections he'd encountered that afternoon. It all had to do with price, he decided. It was just too expensive for a small store owner in The Depression to buy a flasher for each bulb in his sign. There was also the problem of dramatizing the product. Jack was convinced that once the store owner saw the lights on his sign flashing, he'd be impressed enough to buy. But that meant taking the bulbs out of the sign and inserting flashers in each socket. It would never work.

Jack went to his apartment's fuse box, located in the hall. He unscrewed various fuses until he found the one that controlled the living room lights. He inserted the flasher in the fuse socket and watched with glee as each lamp in the room began going on and off—it was like having an amusement park in his own home! That was the answer. He would represent the flashers as being a breakthrough in electronics because, when inserted in the fuse, they would control an entire sign. The merchant, therefore had to buy only one flasher to generate the same sort of attention for his store that the big theaters did with their



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elaborate motors. Surely, for that advantage, a store owner would be willing to pay two-fifty or maybe even three-fifty for a flasher.

When his family returned home, they entered the apartment blinking against the garish scene in their living room. His mother gasped.

"What's going on?" his stepfather asked. Jack told him about his experiences with the flashers. He bubbled with enthusiasm as he forecast the fortunes to be made now that he'd discovered the flasher's use in fuse boxes.

"Dad, believe me, this can't miss. All I have to do is point out to the store owners how their sales will triple by having their signs flashing."

"You may be right, Jack, but could you turn the damn thing off *here*? I'm getting dizzy."

Jack replaced the flasher with the fuse and continued to sell his stepfather. The elder Knebel listened patiently, but did not display the enthusiasm his stepson had hoped for. It wasn't that Jack was looking for any tangible display of interest, although it was in the back of his mind that his stepfather might decide to become active in the flasher business. What he really wanted was a display of appreciation for his ingenuity and business acumen from a proven business success, John Aloysius Knebel. It didn't come. His stepfather treated him as any father would treat a boy who, because of youthful zeal and fervor, has overestimated a success. Jack was hurt, but he went to bed determined to prove to his stepfather that his discovery of the flashers and his creative approach to marketing them would pay off in big dollars.

Jack was up early the next morning. He showered, and carefully slicked his hair back with Sta-Comb, a popular goo of the day. He chose a suit that added maximum years to his appearance and with the flasher in his pocket, headed for the main street. His first stop was a candy store, owned by an elderly husband and wife.

"Good morning, sir," Jack said as he entered the store and flashed a smile. "I'm Jack Knebel, Midwest sales representative for the United Flasher Corporation of New York City. Am I speaking with the owner?"

The man nodded.

"How's business?" Jack asked.

"Lousy. Who'd you say you were?"

Jack repeated his credentials. He looked around the store with an admiring eye and said, "I can't imagine why business would be bad for you. This is a very nice store."

"Business is bad for everybody," the man said, stacking candy bars on the counter.

"Well, sir, I noticed as I came up the street that there are a few other stores like yours in the neighborhood. Competition must be rough."

"Yeah." The man's wife came down from the apartment above the store and drew a glass of seltzer from the fountain. "This is Mr. Knebel from New York," the man said to his wife. She ignored him.

"I was telling your husband, ma'am, that I noticed the competition you have on the street. I was about to tell him how to beat it and become the most successful store on the block."

"Whatever you're selling we don't need," the wife said.

"That's where you're mistaken," Knebel said, perching on a counter stool. "I'm not selling anything. But I am willing to work with you in boosting sales in your store in order to advertise the marvelous new electronic product recently introduced by United Flasher of New York City."

"A what?"

"A flasher. An industrial flasher designed especially for stores just like yours. With it, you can turn your store into the busiest on the block. You can attract the attention of potential customers just as the biggest theaters in the country do, only for pennies compared to what they must pay. It's guaranteed." Knebel didn't say what was guaranteed. If they thought he was assuring increased business, that was their problem.

"No," the wife said.

"Show me," the husband said.

"Come outside with me, sir." Knebel led the owner to the sidewalk and pointed to his sign that was lighted by six bulbs. "You see, sir, your sign is like every other sign on the block, drab and dull. But if those lights were to flash on and off, just like they do in Hollywood and New York, people would immediately see it and come to your store. Now, don't just take my word

for it. This is a scientific fact, backed up by two years' research on hundreds of blocks just like yours. The success of the flashers can be measured, and it has been found that business increases by thirty percent wherever these flashers are used."

"Thirty percent?"

"Yes, sir. Would you like a demonstration? I assure you there is no obligation."

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Where is your fuse box?"

"In the basement, in the back."

"Fine, sir. I'll go down and find the proper fuse. You yell to me when I've found it. Turn on the sign bulbs and let me know when they go off."

"All right." The man yelled to his wife to turn on the sign.

"It's daytime," she yelled back.

"Turn on the sign." She did, and the bulbs glowed.

Knebel found the doorway leading to the cellar and went down the creaky stairs. It was dark in the basement, and he tripped twice over discarded merchandise cartons before groping his way to the fuse box, which was hidden behind a bent and twisted magazine rack. He reached into the box and unscrewed a fuse. He listened; there was no response from upstairs.

"Did it go off?" Knebel yelled.

"What?" the wife yelled back.

"Did it go off? The sign."

"Did it go off, Harold?" the wife yelled to her husband.

"No."

"Shit," Jack muttered, as he screwed the fuse back into the box and tried another. He brushed off the shoulder of his suit jacket and felt grit. There was a scraping noise behind him that he knew was being made by rats. "Shit!"

"It's off," he heard the husband yell from the sidewalk.

"It's off," the wife yelled from upstairs.

Happy, dirty, and sweating, Jack emerged from the basement. He walked past the wife, who was now washing Coke glasses, and joined the husband on the sidewalk. Sure enough, every bulb was flashing on and off.

"You should see it at night, sir," Jack said with pride. "You'll be able to see your sign for miles."

"It's not bad. I like it. How much?"

"That's the beauty of it, sir. Just two dollars and fifty cents."

The store owner put his hand to his head and moaned. "That's too much."

"Too much?" It was hard for the fourteen-year-old boy to keep his cool. "Too much to increase your business by thirty percent?"

"I know, I know, but Momma handles the money and I know what she'll say. It's too much. Everything's too much. She's always saying that. The bills every month for heat and light and—"

"All right. I seldom bring this up because most of the businessmen I deal with see the merchandising value of the flasher immediately and don't make it necessary for me to point out other obvious advantages. You do notice, sir, that sometimes the bulbs are on, and sometimes they are off."

"Of course. They flash—on—off."

"That's right. And did it ever occur to you that when they are off, they are not using electricity?"

"That's right! I didn't think of that."

"All right then, sir. The savings in electricity more than make up for the cost of the flasher during the first month. And, you increase your business by thirty percent."

"That's very good."

"Yes, sir, it is. I know you'll want to leave this marvelous electronic flasher right in your fuse box. And it's just two dollars and fifty cents."

The man went inside and huddled with his wife. They began to argue. Jack looked at his watch. He'd spent a half hour at the store. He brushed off his suit and waited. Finally the man came out and handed him two dollar bills and five dimes.

"Thank you, sir. Happy to be of service."

Knebel went to the distributor's apartment and told him he wanted to buy two dozen flashers but didn't have the cash with him. When the distributor balked, Knebel settled for two, and set out to find another customer. He found four that day, and returned home with a net profit of nine dollars and fifty cents. It wasn't an easy day, but it had gotten easier as it progressed. He became more confident of his pitch, and even managed to get the last two customers to go into the basement for him while he

waited outside for the lights to go out. He also learned that the same sales talk doesn't always work with the same people, especially if someone knows more than the salesman. This he discovered when he was trying to close the deal with the owner of a hardware store.

“. . . and sir, one of the beauties of the United Flasher is the savings in electricity. Because the bulbs are on only half the time, you use half as much electricity.”

“The hell you do. It takes more electricity to start a bulb. Every time you have a bulb come on, it takes a surge of electricity. That damn thing will cost me twice as much.”

Knebel didn't use the line for the rest of the day. He modified it—“You see, sir, every time the bulb is off, you save on electricity. Now, I'd be telling lies if I said you'd save fifty percent on your electric bill because of this flasher. Scientifically, we know that it takes a ten percent extra surge of electricity to light a bulb. So I won't lie to you. By using these flashers, you will save *only* forty percent on your electric bill. But I should add that a forty-percent savings is a substantial one. Don't you agree?” Of course they agreed. Jack Knebel, fourteen years old, was learning all the subtleties of the salesman's trade. By the time three days had passed, he had the flasher sell down to a formula, and was selling them at the rate of a dozen a day.

The elder Knebel now began to show more interest in the flasher project. Finally, after a month had passed, he made a suggestion.

“Jack,” he said, “I think you're really on to something here, and I'd like to help. I think it would be more effective if we worked together. By using a car, we could cover much more territory. You can't drive, but I can. How about going out as a team?”

It was a moment of high irony for the boy. He was thrilled by his stepfather's active interest, of course, but he also felt a twinge of resentment at its late-blooming display. It was just that however—a twinge. The immense feeling of pride in having John Aloysius Knebel come to *him* because of *his* success at the age of fourteen overrode any other reactions. He welcomed his stepdad into the flasher business, and went to bed that night with visions of every sign in America flashing on and off.

John Aloysius Knebel felt it was imperative to get the distributor to lower the price of the flashers. He tried to negotiate a deal, but the distributor refused to cooperate. Knebel then went home and called the United Flasher Corporation in New York City. He was a persuasive man, and received a commitment from the firm to supply him with the flashers for fifteen cents apiece.

He and Jack began selling together.

"Good morning, sir, I'm Jack Knebel, area sales manager for the United Flasher Corporation of New York City. And this is Mr. Smith [or Jones or Brown or Doe], district manager for United Flasher." Once introduced, the elder Knebel participated in the sales pitch.

"He was such an elegant guy," Nebel muses as he recounts those days with the flashers. "My stepdad looked great, and was a very smooth talker. I was so impressed with him I didn't argue when he suggested I go down to the basement to look for the fuse box while he stood outside the store and bullshitted with the owner. I told him I could usually get the owner to go down in the basement, but he felt that wasn't a good idea. He was right, I suppose, but I really hated crawling around in the dirt."

Knebel's stepfather's idea to increase their territory through the use of a car was sound. But the family car had been sold in the midst of the breadwinner's hard times. John Aloysius Knebel took care of that, however, after a month of selling with his stepson. Together, they visited Chicago's leading Cadillac dealer and purchased a four-door convertible with running-boards, twin searchlights, and wire wheels. It cost a little over seven thousand dollars, and was bought on time. Young Jack was thrilled, never considering the basis upon which the car was bought. He assumed his stepdad was finding things brighter in his own business life, aside from the flasher business. He was wrong. The car was bought on the potential earning power of fourteen-year-old Jack.

"We started traveling, my stepdad and me. We covered Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. It was a great act. We'd drive into the main part of a town in that great big Cadillac and work up and down the street. And the money was really rolling in. We

were bringing in as much as fifteen hundred dollars a month. Most of it went to the house. The merchandise was costing us about a hundred a month. The only other overhead was gas for the Caddy, and hotel and restaurant bills while we were traveling. These were pretty high because my stepdad was a big spender. I was happy as hell. It was such a thrill being on the road with him, being out of school and on my own. I never could have supported myself, because I was only given a little pocket money each week; but that didn't bother me. I suppose I was more aware than I realized that I was supporting the family, and I was proud of that."

Household help was again hired for the Chicago apartment (the china and glass ornaments becoming less of a concern), and Mrs. Knebel began traveling with her husband and son. "We'll continue to pyramid this business," John Aloysius often said as they drove between towns. "Maybe we can even begin manufacturing the flashers ourselves and set up a network of salesmen." They never did. They remained content to cover the Midwest and coin the profits of their efforts. It wasn't all as easy as it might seem. The inadequacies of the flashers often caused difficulties. Nebel remembers one incident in a Chinese laundry in Detroit. His stepdad was off with his mother, and he worked a section of the city himself. The laundry was typical. The counter and work area were lighted by a single, 200-watt bulb. The store was brutally hot. Outside, a small sign was lighted by two 40-watt bulbs. Jack suspected the inside and outside lights were on a single circuit, but decided to take a chance. Usually, interior lights weren't on during the day, but the window in front of the laundry was small and dirty. It seemed dark inside even with the 200-watt bulb.

"Good morning, sir, I'm Jack Knebel, sales manager for United Flasher of New York." The owner mumbled something in Chinese and continued ironing a shirt. Knebel gave more of his spiel, still without any positive response. It began to dawn on him that the owner didn't understand English. He started to talk with his hands, pointing over the man's head to the bulb. He went outside and pointed to the sign. "On! Off! On! Off!" he yelled, as people tend to do when someone doesn't speak their language. The owner began to get angry at the intrusion. He

kept saying, "No," and waved his hand for Knebel to leave. Jack was not to be put off, however. He went behind the counter and headed for a door that probably led to the basement. "One minute, one minute," he kept saying as he opened the door and stumbled downstairs. He took out a small pocket flashlight he'd begun to carry, found the fuse box, removed one of the two fuses, inserted the flasher, and came back upstairs. The laundryman was waiting for him at the door, the hot iron in his hand. He was screaming what Knebel assumed were Oriental obscenities. The 200-watt bulb over the counter was flashing on and off, along with the bulbs outside.

"OK. OK," Knebel said, beating a hasty retreat to the basement. He had trouble removing the flasher from the fuse box, managing to get it done just as the impatient Chinese started coming down the stairs. Knebel came upstairs and started to leave. The owner jumped in front of him and blocked his exit. He yelled and chanted in Chinese, all the while pointing to the light bulb above the counter. It was off.

"Turn it on," Knebel snarled.

The owner became madder. He ran to the light switch on the wall and clicked it furiously up and down. The flasher had blown the fuse. Knebel looked at his watch; it was time for his stepdad to pick him up at the end of the street. He backed away from the owner and walked at a brisk pace to the waiting Cadillac.

"Where have you been?" his stepfather asked impatiently.

"In a Chinese laundry. Let's get out of here." His stepfather started the car just as the owner of the laundry came running up the street waving the light bulb and iron. Jack explained to his stepfather what had happened. The following day, John Aloysius Knebel went to the laundry and paid the laundryman fifty cents for a new fuse. He apologized for his salesman, saying he was new to the business, and suggested that in order to secure the man's good faith, he would be willing to let him buy a flasher for cost—one dollar. The owner bought it and bowed as the elder, elegant Knebel departed the premises.

The two Knebels worked the flasher for almost two years. They made over fifty thousand dollars, and enjoyed a style of living at home and on the road that represented a dramatic contrast to the lifestyle of most Depression-bound people of the day.

It was a grand romp of the semi-cons—father and son pitting style and eloquence against the moms and pops of the Midwest. Sometimes, as luck would have it, a big buyer came on the scene and turned a normally successful day into a bonanza. It happened once while the Knebels sat sipping Cokes in a drugstore. John Aloysius got into a conversation with a sign manufacturer who was unfamiliar with the flasher line. The owner of the drugstore, who had just purchased a flasher, was enthusiastic over its potential.

“Perhaps you’d like to buy a quantity of flashers from us and incorporate their advantages into your own business,” young Jack suggested. “We have a crew of seven men in this area and plan to canvas every store. But if you’d like, we can leave this town for you and move on.” He got up from his stool and went to browse among the magazines.

“That’s quite an impressive young man,” the sign man said to the older Knebel.

“Yes, he is. He’ll be going on to electrical engineering school on a scholarship quite soon. I hate to lose him. And his idea is a good one. How about it?” The sign man bought half a gross of the flashers and thanked Jack and John Aloysius for allowing him to do so. He bought them at eighty-five cents a piece, grossing the Knebels over sixty dollars.

Jack Nebel never did go to electrical engineering school. Nor did he ever go on to any further formal schooling. Whether his stepfather would have allowed him to give up the flasher business in favor of schooling is speculative, especially since schooling was the furthest thing from the boy’s mind.

“My stepdad was a great guy,” Nebel says. “He taught me a lot and treated me like an adult. Sometimes I wonder if going to college would have changed my life for the better, but I really don’t think it would have. I learned things from him that no school could have taught me. And having the radio show for so many years has been an incredible education. I’ve been able to sit with the brightest guys in every area of life and question them at length about their expertise. It’s been worth ten Ph.D.’s.”

It wasn’t all work for Jack Knebel as he traveled with his stepfather. The older man knew of his love of show business and did what he could to satisfy that love. Once, in Detroit, he

managed to buy Jack a ticket to a sold-out performance by George Gershwin. His seat was in the first row of the balcony, and Nebel clearly remembers his exhilaration as he watched the master of the American musical theater conduct the orchestra.

John Aloysius also bought Jack a banjo that cost three hundred and fifty dollars. He took lessons from one of the leading banjo teachers of the times, William Stahl, whose instruction books are still used today. The lessons were few, just enough for Jack to learn a sufficient number of chords to play some of the popular tunes of the day. There wasn't time for any prolonged musical study, because selling the flashers necessitated a great deal of traveling that took up the bulk of the teenager's days and nights.

Then, one fall morning, two years after they had started selling flashers, John Aloysius Knebel announced they were taking a vacation in New York City to visit family and friends. They drove to New York in the Cadillac convertible and checked into the then-elegant Colonial Hotel at Eighty-first Street and Columbus Avenue. It was to have been a two-week visit, but John Aloysius met some businessmen, and a young lawyer named Samuel List, who offered him a financial interest in a major wholesale milk concern. Knebel took the profits of the flasher business and invested them in the milk company. He then informed the family that, since he was taking a managerial position with the firm, they would be staying in New York. This announcement was a heartbreaker for young Jack Knebel. There was no place for him in the milk business, and he didn't want to hit the streets of a strange city selling flashers. He moped around the hotel room for over a week before venturing out on a sight-seeing tour of Manhattan, and it took only one day of browsing the Times Square and Broadway areas for his spirits to pick up. This was where he belonged, he decided. Firecrackers, pots and pans, and flashers were things of the past. He was going to take Manhattan by storm. At seventeen, he was ready to assault the bastions of show business. His weapons were a banjo, a quick smile, suave good looks, and an ability to talk anybody into anything. Well, almost anybody.

7

*"I bought the longest baton I could find,
smiled at the dancers, sang 'Bye, Bye Blues'
and bullshitted everybody."*

"I am absolutely appalled at the idea of my son becoming an usher at the Paramount Theatre or any other theater."

That was Laura Knebel speaking the day Jack announced his decision to take an usher's job at the Paramount. It was three months after the Knebels had settled in New York, and six weeks after Jack had taken a job as crew chief of a group of door-to-door salesmen selling Baldwin pianos. To get the job, he passed himself off as twenty-one years old and embellished his background. It was true that for a period of three weeks, he had sold pianos in a Wurlitzer store in Chicago. At that time, he had been about fifteen, but claimed he was nineteen.

The job with Baldwin was viewed as a first step toward getting acclimated to New York. The daily routine was simple. Jack took up residence in the closest neighborhood candy store and sent the salesmen out from there. The store owner was usually pleased with the arrangement because it meant six or eight salesmen buying lunch at the store, as well as cold drinks, cigarettes, and newspapers. Jack perched on a stool at the counter and waited for his men to return with orders, or tales of woe.

Selling pianos wasn't exactly a flashy entrance into show business, but it did put Jack in touch with a piano salesman called Priest, a reference to a brush with the ministry somewhere in his checkered background. Priest claimed to have a background in show business; that interested Jack, and soon he was giving Priest preferential treatment, inviting him to linger at the store to tell him stories about the New York theatrical scene. Priest undoubtedly did have some knowledge of show business, although it is safe to assume that most of his tales were variations on someone else's theme. No matter. He hooked Jack Knebel with his storytelling ability.

Knebel, of course, told Priest that he was looking for a break in show business, and told a few tales of his own about his Midwest successes. Priest suggested that he contact a friend of his at the Paramount Theatre. "They're always looking for ushers," Priest said.

"Oh, come on, Priest," Knebel said. "I don't want to be an usher. I'm a performer."

"So's everybody else. Look, Jack, being an usher at the Paramount is a good deal. You get to meet a lot of people in show business. Besides, it ain't so easy to get an usher's job. They're very particular about who they hire. They train the ushers to be managers of their theaters. It's the Publix Chain, you know."

The Publix chain of theaters was one of the biggest at the time. Top vaudeville acts clamored to play it, and a good act could get forty weeks a year by playing the Publix circuit. Jack went to Priest's friend who, in turn, set him up for an interview with the personnel department.

"Sorry," the personnel man told Jack, "we only hire college men as ushers. Our ushers go on to manage many of our theaters, and we like college in their background."

Knebel was not about to be put off. He went into a masterful spiel about his background as Midwestern sales manager for United Flasher. He told of his blindness, his circus days, his great success with Wurlitzer in Chicago. He even mentioned—casually—that he'd managed a small movie house in Kilbourne, Wisconsin. It was enough. He was hired, and went home to break the news to his family.

"I simply don't feel that being a movie usher is worthy of you," his mother said.

"What is worthy of me?" Jack asked. "Selling pianos?"

"Jack, you know perfectly well that job was just meant to help you adjust to New York. Now that we're settled, I think you should seriously consider a career as a concert pianist. You have a wonderful touch on the piano, and New York has the finest teachers." (Ken Billson said that Knebel did have a nice touch on the piano in those days. He only knew one song, as Billson recalls, but the touch was nice.)

It was naive of Laura Knebel to think that Jack could embark on a concert career at the age of seventeen. Even if his age didn't mitigate against such a move, his temperament and outlook did. He was not about to sit down at a piano or any other instrument for ten hours a day in pursuit of perfection. He was, like his stepfather, in search of fast success.

John Aloysius was another story. He responded to Jack's goals with enthusiasm, just as he had when the boy wished to join the circus. The usher's job, with its overtones of a future career in theater management, made a great deal of sense. It would not be the scuffling existence of a performer trying to break into show business, but would be a solid, businesslike approach to the theatrical world. He tried to explain to his wife, but she remained adamant. Not, however, as adamant as Jack, who stood by his decision to take the usher's job, and left no room for debate.

The New York Paramount was the flagship of the Publix theater chain. Its ornate interior was the subject of giggling scorn by architectural critics. Wide, thickly carpeted staircases curved upward from the lobby to the balconies. Large fountains decorated with nymphs and cherubs dominated open areas. It was a garish setting in which the young ushers, dressed smartly in waist-length military jackets and crisp pants, paraded the patrons to their seats. The militaristic uniforms on the ushers were indicative of the approach taken by the theater's management. Headed by a retired army officer known as Major Jones, the usher corps of Paramount was a theatrical West Point. Each shift was rigidly inspected by Jones. Only when he was satisfied

that all black shoes glistened, all cardboard-backed bib shirts stood at attention by themselves, all creases were sharp, and all black bow ties were properly tied, did he release a shift for duty.

Jack was nervous the first day on the job. And excited. His four days of training under Major Jones were difficult. Hardly a fan of regimentation, Knebel had to concentrate very hard on the seemingly endless list of regulations to which each usher was expected to adhere. One exercise in particular bothered him, the one in which new ushers stood with an orange in their hands to develop what Major Jones considered the proper and exact cupping of the hand for taking a patron's elbow. Knebel found himself walking around with his right hand in the cupped position even at home, and he was certain that when he took the first elbow on his shift, his hand would become sloppy and lose him the job. It didn't, and within a few days he felt very much at home in the lobby and aisles of the Paramount. The payoff, of course, was being in such close proximity to the stars playing the theater. Frank Fay was the master-of-ceremonies during the first six weeks of Knebel's employment, and scheduled to appear in coming months were such names as Bing Crosby, Ray Bolger, Kate Smith, and Eddie Peabody. Peabody, the nation's leading banjo player, was of particular interest to Knebel. He'd lost the banjo given him by his stepfather in Milwaukee, and wanted to buy another. But his funds were short, and his mother's general displeasure with the direction his life was taking did not create an atmosphere in which he could ask for another.

Major Jones was impressed with Knebel. Occasional opportunities came up in which they talked informally. He told Jones of his love for show business, especially the performing end. Jones knew Jack was anxiously awaiting the appearance of Eddie Peabody, and when Peabody did show up at the Paramount, Jones made sure Jack was introduced to him.

"Could I have a picture?" Knebel asked Peabody at their first meeting.

"Sure, son." Peabody gave Jack an eleven-by-fourteen closeup that was to hang on Jack's bedroom wall during the eighteen months he worked at the Paramount.

The friendships Knebel developed with other ushers provided the expected show business chatter. Most of the ushers had

performing aspirations, and took some gratification in impressing their fellow-ushers with their talent that "only needed a lucky break to be discovered." Knebel was no exception, and talked freely and frequently about his goals. One usher who became especially close to Jack was a young man named "Buster" Holt. Buster's first name was actually Worthington, but you called him that under threat of bodily harm. Buster had come to New York from his home in Lowell, Massachusetts. He could dance a little, and had teamed up with another young man from Massachusetts named Ken Billson, who also danced and played mediocre banjo.

"You ought to meet Ken," Holt told Knebel one evening during the supper break.

"I'd love to. You know, Buster, I play banjo and dance a little, too."

"I know. You told me."

That night, after the final performance of the live show had concluded, and the last screening of the feature film was on, Buster and Jack got into their civilian clothes and went across Forty-third Street to the Kermac Hotel, where Holt was living with Billson. Billson, who was low on funds and discouraged about his lack of success in finding a show business opening, had recently gone to work for Western Electric as a switchboard repairman, a job he got through an agency for a fee of eight dollars and which he considered merely a stop-gap measure until lightning struck and brought him a break as a performer.

"I hear you play a pretty good banjo," Knebel said, after Buster introduced him to Ken.

"Just a little. Do you?"

"Yeah, I sure do. I started out in Milwaukee. My dad bought me a beautiful banjo and I studied with William Stahl."

"You studied *with* Stahl?" Billson responded. "I have some of his books."

The next morning, Ken Billson dragged himself to Western Electric after staying up almost all night talking to Knebel and Buster. He and Knebel started hanging around together when their jobs permitted.

"We both just seemed to get along," Billson says. "Jack was a flashy guy. He loved sharp clothes. We tried to put together a

little dance act. Neither of us could dance very good, but it was fun. Buster and I hung around with a couple of Negro dancers, who rehearsed in a room in the rear of the Kermac, and had taken a few lessons from them. In fact, the reason we originally left Massachusetts was because another black team of dancers encouraged us. They said they'd help us put together an act if we came to New York. We never found them."

Knebel's concern with his appearance helped solidify his relationship with Ken Billson. Billson had a bad case of acne when he first met Knebel. At the time, Jack's mother was working as a staff dermatologist at Bellevue Hospital.

"We have to look good to get a break," Knebel told Billson one night as they chatted over orange drinks in Nedicks. "You have to do something about your skin problem."

He encouraged Billson to visit his mother at Bellevue, and Mrs. Knebel (Dr. Knebel, actually) used medication and X-ray treatments to clear up his face.

"Jack's mother was very concerned about him," says Billson. "She asked me a few times to have a talk with Jack and try to help him find a stable direction in his life. I was in the middle because I liked her, but he was my buddy."

It was a busy time for Jack Knebel. He was working hard at the Paramount, rehearsing with Ken Billson for an eventual try at auditions, and doing what most other eighteen-year-olds were doing—chasing girls.

"He was a real chaser," says Billson. "He looked great, and could talk like nobody I'd ever heard. He'd start talking to a girl and before she knew it she was under a spell."

Billson was not as aggressive in the boy-girl game as Knebel because he had left a girl back home, a pretty blonde named Beatrice. Bea, daughter of a proper Boston family, was upset when Ken left for New York, but she understood his ambitions.

During this period, Jack Knebel's stock was rising at the Paramount. He was promoted after a few months to the job of captain-of-the-lobby. As such, he was in command of a group of ushers who dealt with what were called "holdouts," people waiting for the show to break so that they could gain admission to the theater. These holdouts sometimes reached four or five hundred in number. Knebel had a key that unlocked plates

in the floor, leaving open wells in which stanchions were placed; velvet ropes were strung on these stanchions to control the crowds. He enjoyed the increased exposure to the public, especially when he was called upon to make announcements: "There will be seating in fifteen minutes in the balcony." Or, "We have sixty seats available in the first six rows." It was also fun when one of the acts on the bill came to the lobby and entertained the waiting crowds. A miniature piano was used during these performances, wheeled out by the lobby captain, Jack Knebel.

After five months of leading the lobby force of ushers, Knebel was asked by Major Jones if he'd like to be treasurer. This lofty title was misleading. It did not mean that he was being elevated to a position in management. Instead the job involved the day-to-day handling of cash receipts. At specified times during the day, Knebel went to the cashier's cage in the front of the theater and did a count of the tickets sold. He then took the count, along with the cash, to one of two elevators that led to the level of the building where the *real* treasurer was located. Together, under armed guard, they counted the cash and reconciled it against the ticket stubs.

During this period of time, Knebel's parents were having serious discussions about their son's future life. It was obvious from Jack's stories that he was succeeding in climbing the ladder to higher management within the Publix theater chain. The elder Knebel viewed this as an ideal compromise between the boy's desire to break into show business and his own instinct that the business end of any career was more lucrative.

For Jack's mother, there was still disappointment in her son's choice of vocation. She was also concerned about how he spent his off-hours from the Paramount. He seemed never to be home, sometimes disappearing for days at a time, and she assumed his absences had to do with a girl. To check on his movements, she hired a private detective, but he reported little. Mostly, Jack Knebel was observed walking around Broadway with Ken Billson, or rehearsing their act, or sitting in cheap restaurants drinking coffee and talking. But as Billson became more and more involved with Western Electric, he found fewer hours to spend with Knebel. This worried Laura, who expressed her concern

to her husband. His solution was to encourage an even closer relationship between the boys. This meant giving Jack another tool to use in his quest for a performing career, but it was better than being on the receiving end of his wife's constant vocal barrage over their son's future. John Aloysius went out and bought a three-hundred-and-fifty-dollar, Montana model, B & D banjo.

Knebel was thrilled when his stepfather gave him the gift and immediately called Billson. They practiced together night after night, causing Billson, as he recalls, to report to work at the Western Electric shop in a constant state of fatigue. Knebel began taking lessons from a banjo teacher named Frank Reno and spending more time in the musicians' basement dressing room at the Paramount. The team of Billson-Knebel, despite its willingness to rehearse whenever humanly possible, didn't seem to be jelling. They answered a few auditions that were advertised in the trade papers but were never hired.

Possibly, Jack Knebel's only public performance on banjo at that time was in the lobby of the Paramount Theatre while he was still working as treasurer. It happened during Eddie Peabody's booking there. Peabody occasionally came out between shows to entertain the holdouts in the lobby. He and Jack Knebel had developed a friendly relationship, primarily because of Jack's ability to initiate a conversation and to hold his own with almost anybody on any subject. He told Peabody about his new banjo and his daily practice.

"How about playing with me in the lobby?" Peabody suggested one night.

The thought scared Knebel, but he wasn't about to pass up a chance to perform with his idol. Peabody gave him one of the two banjos he traveled with, found him a short stool just like the one he used onstage, and told him to wait behind a lobby door while he, Peabody, went out first and played a few numbers for the crowd. After his performance, when he had the holdouts at their peak of appreciation, Peabody announced, "I have a special treat for you tonight, ladies and gentlemen. One of our very fine ushers, a young man named Jack Knebel, is also, I discovered, a really wonderful banjoist. And I thought you'd enjoy having him come out and play a few duets with me."

There was enthusiastic applause as Knebel came through the

doors in his usher's uniform and placed his stool next to Peabody's. Peabody called out a tune and played a flashy, fast introduction. Knebel joined in, using very basic chords. If he had been performing alone, it might have been evident to the crowd that he wasn't playing much at all. But with the background provided by the especially talented Peabody, it sounded as though Knebel was a budding musical genius. At times, when a chord escaped Knebel, Peabody would yell it to him. They performed for fifteen minutes and received a big hand when they were finished. Jack hoped for other such occasions, but they never materialized. He remained friendly with Peabody, however, and spent considerable time in his dressing room whenever he played the Paramount.

Major Jones continued to expose Jack to various facets of theater management. After three months as treasurer, Knebel asked to be assigned to run the backstage elevator. He wanted to be even closer to the stars, and taking them up and down in the elevator accomplished that. Three months later, Jones offered him the job of sound checker and Jack accepted it.

In those early days of the talkies, theaters showing them experienced certain technical problems. Sound levels were uneven; projectionists had to constantly raise and lower the volume from the projection booth. It was the sound checker's job to view the film scheduled to play the following week, and to prepare a cue sheet for the projectionist. Every Friday, Jack Knebel boarded a train with cans of film under his arms and headed for the Victor recording studios in New Jersey. There he spent the day with a recording engineer, viewing the film that was to begin on Saturday and preparing the cue sheet. Then he returned to the Paramount and delivered the film and sheets to the projection booth.

Sound-checking wasn't much of a job, but it represented to Knebel another phase of his education in the business. It made little difference what each job at the Paramount entailed. As long as he was in touch with the entertainment world he could maintain the hope that a performing break would come his way through the many people with whom he was in daily contact. Ken Billson's decision to take a job in a nonentertainment industry didn't make much sense to Knebel. He knew that *people*

gave you a break, and the people who could do that for him weren't at Western Electric.

Jack also knew that if a performing opportunity didn't materialize, he could still have a career in theater management. His work at the Paramount was obviously more than acceptable to Major Jones, and to other members of management. True, it would be frustrating to have to provide services and a stage for the performers whose ranks he wished to join (management positions in every aspect of the entertainment business were, and still are, filled with performers who never got that lucky break), but, as Knebel saw it, it *was* show business, and a lot better than fixing relays at Western Electric.

"Jack, I think you should spend some time on the executive door," Major Jones told him one morning after the shape-up and inspection. The executive door was on the Forty-third Street side of the Paramount, next to the *New York Times* building, and through it passed VIP's and show business celebrities. A section of the loge was roped off for the seating of these important visitors. The usher at the executive door greeted the visitors, checked, when necessary, the validity of their invitation, and had another usher lead them to their seats.

Knebel worked the executive door on the day shift. He enjoyed it—again, because it put him in contact with the big names of Broadway. It was not, however, one of the big names who provided him with a performing opportunity.

One afternoon a young man came to the executive door and asked to see Sid Zinns, the theater manager. Zinns wasn't in at the moment, so Knebel led the young man to a small lobby to await Zinn's return. There, during some casual conversation, he learned that the visitor was Eddie Jones. Knebel's eyes reflected his interest. Jones' reputation as organist at the Olympia Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, was high. It was said that he was as good as any of the great theater organists in New York City, as good as Jesse and Helen Crawford, as good as Eli Putz. One day, it was said, Eddie Jones would be the featured organist at the Paramount.

Jack Knebel respected talent, but there was something else about Jones that he also respected—the fact that Jones must know many of the heavyweights in the music business. Knebel was

about to ask him for a few introductions when Zinns walked into the lobby, greeted Jones, and led him to his office, leaving a disappointed Knebel to return to the executive door. When his shift was up, he changed into civilian clothes and hung around the door hoping to catch Jones on his way out. At five, Jones did appear. He looked depressed. Knebel gave him a big greeting and suggested they grab a bite to eat. Jones agreed, and they went to a small theatrical restaurant around the corner. After cheesecake and coffee, Knebel asked whether Jones could help him get started in the music business. Jones laughed. "I need the help, not you."

Jones's story was a sad, though not unusual one, the kind of show business tale that was the basis for many a movie about Broadway and the "kids in the chorus." He had fallen in love with a dancer who had been working the Olympia Theatre in a Fred Stone review. When the show moved on to New York, Jones, gave up his job at the Olympia and followed the girl to Manhattan. He'd come to see Sid Zinns to ask for a job as relief organist at the Paramount. Zinns turned him down, not only because he was happy with the relief organist he already had, but because he felt that hiring Jones would cause bad feelings with the managers at the Olympia. They had been very upset when Jones quit so suddenly, and their reaction had quickly gotten around the Publix circuit.

"So," Jones told Knebel, "Here I am in New York with a girl friend and nothing else. No job, no money, no nothing."

Knebel paid the check and invited Eddie to his parent's apartment on Riverside Drive. Eddie accepted, and later in the evening, sat down at the Kranich and Bach grand piano in the living room and played for the family. Impressed with Jones' musical ability, Laura Knebel reacted as might be expected. She invited him to stay as long as he wished. He stayed five days before going back to New Haven to borrow some money from his parents. Four days later he returned and camped in for six weeks.

Eddie's stay at the Knebel's home was a meaningful period for Jack because it put him in close daily contact with a talented young man. As their relationship developed, Knebel decided to take what he considered a major step forward in his quest for theatrical success. He suggested to Jones that they team up as

songwriters—he would write lyrics and Jones would take care of the music. Jones agreed. He'd already had a few tunes published, a fact Knebel knew and counted on as a wedge into the offices of the leading music publishers.

The songwriting team of Knebel and Jones went to work. They were prolific, but not successful. Knebel had never written lyrics before, and Jones—as fine a performing musician as he was—simply wasn't destined to write great and memorable melodies. But they tried, working together nights at the Knebel piano and running to publishers during the day whenever Jack could get time off from the Paramount. He began to miss more and more shifts at the theater, a situation observed by Major Jones, who had a talk with him and pointed out how highly regarded he was as future managerial material. Knebel was flattered, but his fling into songwriting had gripped him in a vise of fanciful promise. He preferred being introduced to people as a songwriter, not as a future theater manager.

Knebel quit his job at the Paramount and committed himself to a full-time career as a songwriter. It was folly. His parents reacted in concert, although from different reasoning points. His mother didn't like the thought of him running around all day. John Aloysius saw his stepson's move in giving up a sure-fire career as a theater manager as a practical mistake. But Jack stuck to his guns, at least until the most persuasive of all arguments presented itself: his partner, Eddie Jones, took a job as an *usher* at the Beacon Theatre. It was more than a blow to Knebel. It was a psychological calamity. There he was, a former usher, a former manager-to-be, out of work because he wanted to be free and creative like his partner.

"Why?" Knebel asked Jones.

"Because I don't like being broke," was Jones' reply.

Two days later, Jack Knebel was hired as a doorman at the Beacon. One week after he started work, he and Eddie made their first public stage appearance as "one of the country's fastest rising songwriting teams." It all happened because Eddie knew the organist at the Beacon, Lillian Rausch. He convinced Lillian and the manager at the Beacon to let them perform their tunes during intermissions.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a rare treat in store for you

this evening," Miss Rausch would announce. "We have on our staff two of the brightest songwriting talents in New York, Eddie Jones and Jack Knebel. Perhaps you've already met them—one is an usher and one a doorman. Their future is bright, and we thought you'd enjoy hearing them perform some of the tunes they've written and that one day will be classics. Let's have a nice round of applause . . ."

Eddie and Jack, in uniform, strode down the aisles. Eddie sat at the mighty Wurlitzer and played, while Jack sang the songs they'd written. Knebel was no singer, but he could carry a tune, and his combination of talking and singing the lyrics was good enough to gain some acceptance from the audiences. They did their act during every intermission at the theater, coming in and putting on their uniforms even when they weren't on duty. It was fun, although nothing tangible ever came of their efforts. Knebel eventually tired of the routine and contacted his former boss at the Paramount, Sid Zinns. Zinns was about to leave the Paramount to become manager of the Winter Garden Theatre, an all-movie house at the time, and asked Knebel if he'd like to be assistant manager. Knebel accepted the offer, thus ending the team of Jones and Knebel. His new title pleased his mother and father; respectability and business success seemed just around the corner for their son.

"I felt pretty good about myself," John Nebel comments today about his job as assistant manager at the Winter Garden. "I was nineteen years old and wearing striped pants and a double-breasted dinner jacket. I used to stand outside the Winter Garden and watch the girls go by. Pretty classy stuff."

"He really looked good," Ken Billson recalls. "He carried off the job like an elegant butler. We were still buddies, and he always got me in free to see all the movies. He liked being in a spot where he could do something for you, get you something free."

One afternoon, an usher came to Jack Knebel and said there was a gentleman at the box office who wished to be given a free pass to the theater. Knebel examined the card the usher held—Jess Carlin, Publisher, *Orchestra World*. Knebel went immediately to the box office and introduced himself to Carlin.

He knew of him, and had read his magazine. The fact that *Orchestra World* was nothing more than a puff sheet through which services were exchanged was unknown to Jack Knebel. All he knew was that it dealt with the world of big bands and bandleaders, a world in which he had an interest.

Carlin was accompanied by his wife, and Knebel had an usher lead them to choice seats in the loge. He pocketed Carlin's business card and resolved to call him within a few days to see whether he could help him break into the band business.

He didn't have to make the call because the next day, while he was standing in front of the theater, Jess Carlin came strolling by.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Knebel," Carlin said. "What a pleasure to see you again."

Knebel knew Carlin was being especially nice to him because he wanted to keep the free passes coming. That didn't bother Knebel because he intended to do a bit of using himself.

"Mr. Carlin, it's good to see you again. Did you enjoy the show yesterday?"

"Very much. So did Mrs. Carlin."

"Good. You know, Mr. Carlin, I meet a lot of people in my job, but you're someone I really wanted to meet. I'm very interested in the music business. I am a musician myself."

"Really? Do you play an instrument?"

"Yes. Banjo. And I sing. In fact, I'm also a songwriter. I was with the team of Jones and Knebel for awhile."

"Of course."

"I've been planning to put together a big band of my own."

"You'd make a fine bandleader. You make a very good appearance, Mr. Knebel."

"Thank you."

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Knebel. I'll give this some thought and see if I can come up with some work for you. How would that be?"

"I'd really appreciate it."

"It'll take me a few days."

"That'll be fine."

"Good—by the way, Mrs. Carlin and I would love to see the new film. Could you arrange that?"

"Oh, sure. Anytime you say."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure."

When Jess Carlin and his wife came to see the new movie at the Winter Garden, Knebel was on hand to greet them and take them to their seats. Before they entered the theater, Carlin asked whether Knebel could get a day off the following week.

"Sure, Mr. Carlin. Any day at all."

"Good. Next Tuesday, there is a special dance contest at Rye Beach. How would you like to be one of the judges?"

"I've never been a dance-contest judge before."

"That doesn't make any difference. You'll watch the dancers with the other three judges and compare notes. Besides, I'd like you to do a few song numbers with the house band."

Knebel enthusiastically agreed to come to Rye Beach the following Tuesday.

The dance contest was being held to honor the twenty-fifth anniversary of McCormick and Barry, one of the nation's leading ballroom operators. It was a typical Jess Carlin promotion. By putting together a special anniversary edition of *Orchestra World* for McCormick and Barry, he was assured of advertising by all the musicians who had ever worked, and wanted to continue working, in the McCormick and Barry ballrooms. Band-leaders, and even individual musicians, forked up fifteen or twenty dollars to have their congratulations printed in the magazine. Carlin, a former salesman for the National Cash Register Company, had been working such deals successfully ever since forming *Orchestra World*. Besides the money collected in advertising, each issue carried lavish ads for every service and product Carlin used. The shop that cleaned his suits, the florist where he bought flowers, the local food store, the drugstore, the barber-shop—everybody was included in the magazine in exchange for free services to Carlin. Even his rent was free.

Knebel took a train to Rye Beach. He was introduced by Carlin to McCormick and Barry as a bright young bandleader from the West Coast who had come East at Carlin's urging. McCormick and Barry were impressed. So was Knebel.

After an introduction to the other judges, one of whom was from the Arthur Murray studio in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Carlin

brought Knebel over to the bandstand to meet the musicians and to tell them what song he would sing. The band was one of many billed as a collegiate unit, founded and nurtured on a college campus. For some reason, that college image warmed the imaginations of the dancers who flocked to the ballrooms. There was a naughty and carefree image attached to university campuses in those days, a youthful playing out of the Roaring Twenties that the bands carried into the early thirties. Again, Carlin introduced Knebel as a West Coast discovery of *Orchestra World*.

"What tune do you want to do?" Knebel was asked.

"Oh, I don't know." He searched his memory for a tune to which he knew all the lyrics. "How about 'Baby Face?'"

"Great."

Megaphone in hand, the dapper, skinny young man "from the West" wowed the dancers with his rendition of "Baby Face." Many came up to him after the dance contest and questioned him about his plans for the future. Jess Carlin answered as his manager: "We're sifting through offers now. But I assure you he'll be back in this area very soon."

Later, McCormick and Barry suggested to Carlin and Knebel that Knebel lead the house band at the Ritz Ballroom in Bridgeport the following Tuesday. Tuesday night was traditionally a dead night in ballrooms. On other nights of the week the Ritz featured such big names as Guy Lombardo, Sammy Kaye, and Vincent Lopez. They offered Knebel twenty-five dollars for the night.

"We'll consider it," Carlin answered quickly. "I'll get back to you tomorrow." Knebel could have died at that moment. He wanted that Tuesday night booking more than anything he'd ever wanted before. But he kept silent. Carlin had gotten him this far; he'd see how much further he could take him.

The following afternoon, as Jack sat in Carlin's office, a long narrow room cluttered with back issues of *Orchestra World*, Carlin called Barry and accepted the offer for his client, Jack Knebel.

"We'll need pictures," Barry said.

"You'll have them tomorrow," Carlin answered.

After hanging up the phone, Carlin turned to Jack. "Have you got any pictures?" he asked.

"I have a few from some hat modeling I did once."

The hat-modeling job was a one-day affair during his stint as a songwriter with Eddie Jones. Knebel loved hats and always wore one. He'd been paid ten dollars for the modeling session, along with ten prints of the photos. He raced home and brought them back to Carlin, who studied them carefully before deciding they'd do for the Bridgeport engagement. But he told Knebel he'd have to get others made that looked more theatrical. Knebel took care of that the next day by going to a Broadway photographer and having shots taken of him in his best blue suit, waving a long baton he'd bought before the sitting. The salesman in the music store had gone into the relative merits of batons, stressing their feel and balance. "Just give me the longest one you've got," Knebel said.

When he told Carlin he'd had the photos taken, Carlin chastised him for having paid for them. He knew a dozen photographers who owed him free services because of ads run in *Orchestra World*. He suggested Knebel have some cards printed, linking him with the magazine.

"What should I call myself?" Knebel asked.

"I met you at the movies. Call yourself the cinematics editor."

The following Tuesday afternoon, Jack Knebel thumbed his way to New Haven. He can't explain to this day why, with a twenty-five dollar job, he chose to hitchhike instead of taking the train as he'd done for a free appearance the previous week. But hitchhike he did, and he soon got a ride from a man heading for Bridgeport. It wasn't until they reached the outskirts of the city that Knebel told the driver who he was and why he was going there. He did it because, as they stopped at an intersection, they were face to face with a sign on a pole that featured one of Knebel's hat-modeling pictures. The sign touted the first Bridgeport appearance of the West Coast's brightest new bandleader success, Jack Knebel.

"Say, that *is* you," the driver said. "This is really an honor." He didn't ask why "the West Coast star" was hitchhiking to his Bridgeport appearance, although if he had, Knebel had an

answer ready: it was the lure and love of the open road, the natural way to travel for a vagabond singer.

When the man dropped Knebel off in front of the Ritz, it was only six o'clock. The band didn't start playing until eight, and Knebel wouldn't come on until nine. Floor waxers were hard at work when he entered, and he asked one if either Mr. Barry or Mr. McCormick were around. They weren't. Knebel went to a phone and called the number given to him by Jess Carlin. Barry answered.

"How did you get to the ballroom from the train?" Barry asked. "Cab."

"Well, we have to get you dinner. I'll send a car over and the driver will take you to a good restaurant. Don't pay. We have an arrangement. By the way, Knebel, those pictures of you stink. You have to get some others made."

"I've already sent for them from the Coast. They'll be here the end of the week."

"Good. See you tonight."

After dinner, the driver of Barry's car drove him back to the ballroom, where he was led to a dressing room by Barry himself. He had applied a little makeup before leaving New York City, just in case he didn't have a chance to do it in Bridgeport; now he reapplied more and checked his appearance in the mirror. He was brimming with confidence. He looked good, as usual. He'd learned the lyrics of eight songs, and Carlin had informed the band of them on Monday so they'd have a chance to run through the music.

When the band started playing at eight, Knebel surveyed the crowd from backstage. The room appeared crowded to him. He asked a stagehand if it was a big crowd for a Tuesday night.

"Sure is," the man replied. "Biggest Tuesday night I've seen in years."

Buoyed by his drawing power, and with his baton in one hand and his megaphone in the other, Knebel strode out on the stage as the MC announced him. The crowd applauded and pressed close to the bandstand.

"Thank you very much, folks. What a great welcome. And I wanna tell you it's great to be here in the East. The West is great, but there's nothing like the bands right here on the East

Coast, especially Bridgeport. Lots of folks don't realize I lived in New Haven when I was a boy. It's like coming home to me. So let's celebrate."

He raised the baton and gave a downbeat for the first tune of the night, "Bye Bye Blues." The band responded, and soon the dancers were jitterbugging as Knebel sang through the megaphone and led the fifteen pieces behind him. His heart pounded and sweat appeared on his brow. He smiled big. He winked at the girls. He nodded to the fellows his approval of their partners. It was a dream fulfilled.

"They thought I was great," Nebel says, as he remembers that night in Bridgeport. "I didn't know what the hell I was doing with the baton and all—just waving it around. But a bandleader really doesn't lead a band, anyway. I was pretty good with women, and smiled a lot and talked to the dancers as they came past the bandstand. I had bullshitted Carlin, he had bullshitted McCormick and Barry, and I was bullshitting everybody in the place. That's the way life is, I guess."

Knebel played three more Tuesday-night dates at the Ritz in Bridgeport. Barry suggested he put together his own band, and if it looked good, they'd book it into the Ritz on a steady basis. Knebel told Barry he was in the process of doing just that, although it was taking time because he wanted only the very best musicians and arrangers.

He quit his job at the Beacon and went about the task of better establishing himself in the music business. Armed with pictures, a few newspaper write-ups from Bridgeport and a crash course from Jess Carlin in how to live free, Knebel set up a number of situations in which he received services in return for having him, the budding musical star, speak nicely about the providers. He used his business card from *Orchestra World* freely, gaining admission for himself and Ken Billson to most of the big theaters in Manhattan. They also spent a great deal of time in the big ballrooms of the city, something Ken especially enjoyed. He loved ballroom dancing, and he and Knebel often conned themselves into ballrooms to pick up single girls who were there for just that purpose. While Billson danced with his girl, Knebel talked to his, weaving his brand of verbal magic on her.

Billson also remembers crashing the gate at the Palace one

night when Kate Smith and Judy Garland were sharing the bill. There was a packed house every night during the run of the show, and gaining free admission represented a major feat to Billson.

"He was also great at getting free clothes," Billson comments. "There was a tailor named Colby who used to make us suits for nothing because Jack told him he'd give him a plug when he made his public appearances as a bandleader. We even had a neighborhood cleaning joint who pressed our clothes for nothing while we sat in the back of the shop. Knebel was some talker. Unbelievable."

The performing team of Knebel and Billson, formerly deactivated by a natural drifting apart, was reactivated. They made the rounds of casting directors whenever Ken could steal some time away from Western Electric. One call they answered was for chorus boys for a Broadway musical. The auditions were being held at the Capitol Theatre, and Knebel sold Billson on the idea of auditioning with him. It was winter, and Billson forgot he was wearing his long underwear, something his mother had always told him to do in cold weather to stave off sore throats. When the director told all the auditioning male dancers to strip to their shorts, Knebel started peeling off his clothes (an unusual event, according to Billson, because Jack never liked people to see his long, skinny body), and Billson dropped his pants. It was only then that he realized he had on his union suit. He hastily buttoned up and ran from the hall, leaving Knebel furious.

"Did you get the job?" Billson later asked Knebel.

"No, and I wouldn't have taken it, anyhow. All those guys were making passes at me."

"Jack kept talking during this period about the big band he was going to form," Billson says. "But he never took any steps to make the plan work. That was something you had to understand about Jack. He had big plans about a lot of things, but never wanted to dig in with all the grubby preliminary work you had to do to get them started."

Billson's observation was accurate. What Jack Knebel wanted to do was *lead* a band, not form one. Forming a new band was a difficult, time-consuming, and expensive task. Arrangers had to

be chosen and hired to create a book. Musicians had to be hired and rehearsed. It was hard, speculative work, especially for a twenty-year-old with only the basic knowledge of a few banjo chords to contribute to the project. Jess Carlin kept after Knebel to form his band, but the answer was always the same: "Just as soon as I find the right combination."

In the summer of 1931, the right combination presented itself. It consisted of eighteen Philippine musicians and a pair of female Siamese twins. Knebel happened upon them one afternoon while he and Billson were passing a Chinese restaurant on West Seventy-first Street. The Mayflower, as was customary for Chinese restaurants in those days, offered live music during serving hours. Knebel and Billson went to the entrance and looked at the sign advertising the restaurant and its music. There, in the midst of menu prices and favorable adjectives, was a picture of Jack Knebel, the same picture that had hung on telephone poles in Bridgeport. Evidently, an agent Knebel visited looking for work had taken his hat-modeling picture and used it to tout the Philippine band.

The sound of marimbas would not have lured Knebel and Billson inside. But the picture on the board was intriguing. Knebel flashed his business card from *Orchestra World* to the owner and said he wanted to review the band for the magazine. After apologies for the inadvertent use of Knebel's photograph, the owner gave the boys a choice table and, during the first intermission, introduced them to the bandleader, a dapper middle-aged fellow named Nick Amper.

Amper had been the conductor of the Philippine Constabular Band in Manila. He had been approached by a German booking agent named Max Unger, whose wife, a Philippine girl, had introduced him to Siamese twins who could roller skate a little and who played rudimentary ukuleles. Unger saw in them the makings of a successful flash act in the United States—a flash act being one loaded with people and featuring colorful costumes and a lot of stage movement. He had heard the marimba band conducted by Nick Amper and decided the combination of the Siamese twins and the band was just what he needed.

When the troupe arrived in America, however, things weren't as easy as Unger had forecast. Theater bookers found the cost

of the act prohibitive, even though everyone was willing to work for practically nothing. Everyone, that is, except Max Unger. Disgusted, he abandoned the group in New York, leaving Nick Amper responsible for eighteen musicians and a pair of Siamese twins.

Amper was, of course, delighted at the chance to be reviewed in *Orchestra World*. He'd never heard of the magazine but was impressed, nonetheless. The twins weren't working at all. The band was being paid two hundred and fifty dollars a week by the *Mayflower*, to be split between Amper, eighteen musicians, and the twins. Knebel saw an opportunity. He and Billson sat there all afternoon and talked to Amper during intermissions. By the time evening arrived, Amper had agreed to let Knebel front the band and to try to obtain better bookings.

The first thing Knebel did was to go to the manager of the Beacon Theatre, where he'd worked as a doorman. The theater was following an all-film format, but Knebel convinced the manager to book the Philippine band. The deal made, Knebel went about the business of getting the band ready for its opening. It didn't need rehearsing because the musicians had been playing together for years. They did have to get used to having Jack Knebel in a tux waving a baton in front of them, but that didn't prove difficult. They never looked at him anyway.

The deal at the Beacon was that Knebel would provide the band on a trial basis. If it didn't click within two days, it would play out the week for nothing.

The only problem still to be solved was with the musicians' union in New York. Up until this time, Amper hadn't bothered to gain conditional cards for the band members; jobs like the *Mayflower* didn't require it. But the Beacon Theatre was union.

Conditional cards for visiting musicians cost twelve dollars each. Knebel borrowed the money from his father to pay for them.

Jack Knebel and his band opened at the Beacon Theatre on a Saturday afternoon. Everything clicked. The band rose from the pit as the footlights glowed to life, and Knebel made his entrance to heavy applause. The band was originally scheduled to do three shows that day. It did five, finishing up at two o'clock Sunday morning. Knebel stood backstage after the final

show and accepted praise from visitors, including a representative of the musicians' union.

"Mr. Knebel," the union man said, "you're to be congratulated for bringing a big band into the Beacon. You've done a lot for live music in New York."

Knebel was thrilled. He woke Billson up at four in the morning and replayed the entire evening for him.

The next day the band did another five shows. When the night was over, the manager of the Beacon took Knebel for coffee and told him he was holding the band over for three weeks. In addition, Barry called and said he thought he could book the band into a few ballrooms.

It was all too good to be true, as Knebel found out when he returned to the theater to pick up some things. Waiting for him was the same union representative who'd congratulated him the previous night. At first Knebel thought he was going to be given a plaque for outstanding service to the music world. Instead, he was informed that his request for conditional cards had been rejected by the union because the musicians weren't citizens. Eighteen American musicians would take over, beginning with the first show Monday afternoon.

Knebel couldn't believe it. He pleaded, screamed, threatened, cried. It was no use. The union decision was final.

Knebel spent the next month watching one band after another play the Beacon. Because of the success with *his* band, the theater decided to stay with live music. Will Osborn and his band played there. So did Cab Calloway. Every big-name band came into the Beacon, and all Jack Knebel could do was go and watch on free passes given him by the manager.

Most of the Philippine musicians decided to give up and go back to Manila. That left only the Siamese twins for Knebel to book. He managed to find some work for them in department stores around New York and was about to take them out on the carnival circuit when they died.

The Knebel bandleading star, which had risen over a single weekend at the Beacon Theatre, was in a rapid descent within a month. Based on his billing at the Beacon, Knebel landed a job leading a four-piece group in a dark and dingy taxi dance hall called the Miami Ballroom. It was in the basement of the

Astor Theatre, right under a store used by the makers of Lucky Strike cigarettes to demonstrate how cigarettes were manufactured.

Knebel played banjo on the job and swayed around the tiny stage, smiling at the hostesses working the place. The room never did much business, but all it needed were ten or twelve live marks each night to pay for the band and the girls. Men came in and bought twenty dance tickets for two dollars. They danced close with the girl they chose, and after five minutes of what the manager called "belly-rubbing," would spout a full-fledged erection. That's when the girl asked for the tickets. Usually, the man thought she was only asking for a single ticket, and tore one off his roll of twenty. That's when the girl broke the news that the band had played twenty tunes, and that he'd used up his twenty tickets. As unfair a situation as it was, most men bought another twenty tickets, sometimes going through ten dollars a night to prolong what was certainly sexual frustration.

"We each got thirty-five dollars a week for playing at the Miami, which was pretty good bread," Nebel says. The problem was that you had to go out and play dance marathons to promote the Miami. On our nights off, they'd send us all the way to Brooklyn or the Bronx, where we'd play until four in the morning. All you got extra was five cents for the subway. It was always a big deal—"Direct from the Miami Ballroom, the Miami Ballroom Orchestra." Maybe if I got billing I wouldn't have minded it so much."

Knebel played a few more ballrooms of the Miami type. He jerked sodas in a candy store in the Paramount Theatre building, and did some modeling. But most important at this stage of his life, he met Lillian Schubert.

8

“Rin Tin Tin’s daughter went for her ankles . . .”

There was a definite routine to Sunday mornings at the Knebel apartment. Ken Billson arrived early enough to have breakfast with the family. After Jack put the finishing touches on his attire for the day, they all went to a neighborhood Presbyterian church. Jack and Ken usually found something to giggle about during the sermon, and were cautioned by Laura Knebel’s stern looks. After church, Jack and Ken often took a long walk down Riverside Drive. They’d been doing it for months, and although the walk in itself was pleasurable, it also afforded them the opportunity to meet pretty young girls.

On this particular Sunday, Knebel was wearing a new, long, camel’s hair overcoat. It had pearl buttons, and was secured around the waist by a wide belt. Of course, he also carried his walking stick. And he had, on a leash, a female German Shepherd puppy named Lady Luck who, according to the manager of the Beacon Theatre, was a direct descendant of Rin Tin Tin. The puppy was to have been given away in a contest as a door prize, but when the contest was called off, the manager gave the dog to Knebel.

Jack let Lady Luck off her leash for a moment to chase a stick that Ken had tossed. The dog was returning with it when two young girls came around the corner. Lady Luck dropped the stick and started nipping at one of the girls ankles. She screamed and tried to hide behind her girl friend. Knebel ran over and grabbed the dog.

"It's all right," he said to the girl. "She was only playing."

"I'm afraid of dogs," she said.

"You shouldn't be afraid of her. She's descended from Rin Tin Tin. I'm Jack Knebel, the bandleader. Maybe you saw me at the Beacon?"

The girls didn't respond.

"Do you live around here?" Jack asked.

"No," the other girl said. "Come on, Lillian." The two girls headed up the street.

"Lillian? Is that your name?" Knebel asked, following them.

"Yes."

"Where do you live?"

"Right here." The other girl led Lillian into the foyer of an apartment building. Knebel watched as they disappeared into the inner lobby.

"Let's go," Billson said.

"Let's wait for them at the corner," Knebel said. "I don't believe they live here."

"So what? They brushed us."

"No, they didn't. They're just a little afraid. I like Lillian. She's pretty."

"Yeah. And that leaves me the other one."

"So what? She's pretty too."

They waited on the street corner for ten minutes. Then, as Knebel had anticipated, the girls came out of the building and started walking towards them. When they came abreast of them, Knebel said, "I knew you didn't live there. Look, we're nice guys. All we'd like to do is be able to call you and ask you out to a movie or something. What's wrong with that?"

The girls coyly played with Knebel's reasoning. He directed most of his talk to Lillian, but it was the other girl who gave in. "I'm Mary. This is my friend Lillian Schubert." Mary gave the

boys her sister's phone number, through which they could be reached.

Knebel bragged to Billson when they resumed their stroll that he had done a magnificent job of talking to get that phone number. Billson agreed. Knebel didn't know, however, that the girls had stood inside the lobby, expecting the boys to be waiting for them outside. It was Mary who had wanted to encourage them, for she had taken a shine to Billson. Lillian thought Jack Knebel and his walking stick was, to use today's terminology, a creep.

The couples double-dated a few times before Jack and Lillian began seeing each other alone. Their dates were simple. Whenever Jack could promote movie passes using his *Orchestra World* card, they went to the movies. Most times, they just walked or sat in the park. Lillian remembers going to Roseland once with Ken Billson and his girlfriend Bea from Massachusetts. Ken and Bea loved to dance. Nebel enjoyed listening to the bands.

Bea had come to New York because Jack Knebel called her. Ken had a badly infected knee, and Jack thought Bea could boost his spirits. It wasn't easy for her to get her parents' permission to leave, but they gave in, and she stayed in New York until she and Ken were married. The marriage, despite Jack's feigned pleasure, was a blow to him because it took away his best friend. But more important, the marriage caused him to feel personally unfulfilled. Marriage was the mark of a man, he felt. Billson had stepped into manhood and taken on the responsibility of a wife, and would enjoy the closeness of a marital relationship. While Jack Knebel had occasionally experienced sex in his travels, it was the exception rather than the rule. The thirties' attitude toward premarital sex was quite different from that of the sixties and seventies, and "nice girls didn't go to bed with men before they were married." Lillian was a virgin, and she abided by that moral dictum.

Billson's marriage projected to Knebel an image of life as it was supposed to be, with a woman who loved you and fought your battles with you, a woman ready to relieve your sexual tensions, a woman for whom you made your scores. Ken and

Bea remember one night when the three of them walked down Broadway. Ken held Bea's arm. Jack walked slightly apart from them. When they stopped in front of a movie theater and Ken suggested they all go in, Jack declined, claiming to have a very important date downtown. Ken and Bea knew he didn't, and the sight of him walking off alone, his hand thrust into the pockets of his overcoat, his head down, has always stayed with Bea. "He was the loneliest person I ever knew," she says.

Knebel was in love with Lillian, but the thought of marriage scared him. So did the uncertain future ahead of him. He loved the music business, but knew inside he'd never really succeed as a bandleader. Of course, he could sell; but that wasn't show business, nor would it bring him the public adulation he desired. At that time, at the age of twenty, he could have used the services of a good psychiatrist to help him sort out his life. Maybe his mother was right. Perhaps he needed a stabilizing influence to help set the direction his life should take. Certainly, Lillian Schubert could be that influence. He felt at ease with her, both when they were alone and in her home. The Schubert family lived at 428 East Eighty-second Street, in the heart of Germantown. It was a rough neighborhood, and there was always a gang of tough-looking fellows hanging around the block. The first time Jack came to call on Lillian, he dressed in his best Broadway manner. As he strolled up the block swinging his walking stick, a couple of the local boys spotted him and started jeering. They didn't threaten him physically, but Knebel was certain they would. He knocked on the door of Lillian's building with his stick and tried to assume a stance of confidence until Lillian let him in. From that moment on, the walking stick was always hidden beneath his long coat when he turned into East Eighty-second Street.

Ma Schubert, Lillian's mother, treated Jack with warmth and love. The more he visited the Schuberts, the fonder Ma became of this well-dressed and glib young man.

The feeling of warmth and acceptance was not, however, present in his own home when he brought Lillian to visit. There wasn't any overt hostility, but Mrs. Knebel never let down the social barrier that stood between the Knebels and the Schuberts. The tension during Lillian's visits increased as Mrs. Knebel

realized that the girl was more than just a passing fancy for her son.

On the other hand, Mrs. Knebel's attitude towards Bea was one of motherly love. She accepted her without reservation, and spent a great deal of time helping her adjust to being away from home. When Ken announced he and Bea were going to be married, Mrs. Knebel took Bea into her bedroom and said, "If it were only you for Jack, Bea, I'd be happy. I wish it were *you* for Jack." Bea speculates that the fact that she was from a Boston family struck some favorable chord with Mrs. Knebel who, with her pretensions, would consider that a positive credential.

Jack was best man for Ken and Bea when they married, and after the ceremony, Mr. and Mrs. Knebel hosted a small reception for the newlyweds in their apartment. Lillian was there, and sat quietly next to Jack. When it was time for a toast, Mrs. Knebel raised her glass of champagne and said, "May you grow old gracefully together." Jack looked at Lillian and smiled. She shyly smiled back. Jack understood Lillian's shy manner. She was, after all, only seventeen. That's what she told him when they started going together. If he knew she was really fifteen, as was the case, he would have understood even better.

The Knebels continued to entertain the Billsons, frequently taking them to dinner. Jack and Lillian usually accompanied them, although there were times when Jack would just as soon have skipped it. His mother's doting over Bea was hard to take. And as often happens, his mother's attitude toward the girl he loved only reinforced his decision to marry her. He proposed to Lillian in a park on the East River Drive, right next door to Gracie Mansion, the home of the mayor of New York. She accepted, and they set the wedding date for a few weeks before Christmas, 1931.

Lillian was working during the Christmas season at Wana-maker's. A girl friend at the store helped her change the dates on the paper she had obtained from the Census Bureau for identification. At this time, Lillian was sixteen years old; the forged dates made her eighteen.

Jack prevailed on Ken and Bea Billson to stand up for him and Lillian at their wedding. Ken agreed, but with reservations.

He didn't like being placed in the middle between Jack and his family, and rightly so. Mrs. Knebel had been good to him, and because of her generous aid when Bea first arrived in New York, she had a warm spot in his heart.

Realizing that his upcoming marriage would involve the need for money, Knebel took a job in Macy's, demonstrating wooden milk-wagon toys. If he had taken some pride in that Christmas job, the marriage probably would have taken place. But when the clerk at the marriage license bureau asked him his occupation, he answered, "Bandleader." A newspaper reporter assigned to the beat of checking for celebrities at the license bureau, mentioned back at the newspaper that "Jack Knebel, bandleader," was getting married, and someone said it was the Jack Knebel who'd established the live music policy at the Beacon Theatre. That made him a celebrity of sorts, so the reporter was sent to the address on the license application—325 Riverside Drive, the Knebel home. Mrs. Knebel answered the door, and when the reporter told her why he was there, she slammed the door in his face and phoned her husband. He came home immediately, and together they waited for Jack to come through the door. When he did, and was confronted with the fact that his mother and father knew of his plans, he turned on them. A violent argument ensued, and Jack walked out, slamming the door behind him.

It wasn't over. The Knebels visited Lillian's house and had a long talk with Ma Schubert, using the basic selling techniques employed so successfully by John Aloysius Knebel all through the years. When their opening, say-something-good portion of the conversation was over, Mrs. Knebel got down to the business of trying to convince Ma that the marriage wasn't a sensible idea. Ma took the position that whatever happened, happened. She didn't wish to offend the Knebels, but she was not about to fall into their camp.

Frustrated over their inability to solve the problem through Ma Schubert, the Knebels went to Ken and Bea Billson and leaned on them a little. After making it plain that she didn't think much of Ken's betrayal of her, Mrs. Knebel said to him, "I want you to talk to Jack and stop it."

"I can't, Mrs. Knebel. I just can't do that to my friend. And I'm sorry. I really am."

There was nothing left to do but go to the pastor of their church and have him call the couple together for a conference. The following night, with the Billsons also present, Jack held Lillian's hand as the pastor spoke to them of the dangers of rushing into marriage. When he finished his speech, Laura Knebel took over and laced into Jack for deliberately trying to hurt her. The debate was one-sided; the teams were stacked against Jack and the girl he wanted to marry. But when Mrs. Knebel was finished, Jack got up and announced, "I know how you all feel, but it doesn't make any difference. Lillian and I are getting married because she's pregnant."

There were some mutterings and muffled gasps before Laura Knebel was able to regain her composure and confront her son with what he had said.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Yes."

Laura Knebel looked at Lillian, who dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Well, we'll soon find out," Mrs. Knebel said. "You're coming with me tomorrow morning to Bellevue."

There was little Jack could do but admit he was lying and call off the wedding. The experience was traumatic for Lillian. She told Jack she didn't want any more trouble with his family and wasn't going to see him again.

Jack accepted Lillian's decision and didn't try to contact her until March. When he did call, Lillian was truthful. She said she still loved him and wanted to marry him. They went to a park and discussed the situation. They knew Jack's parents would never soften their attitude, and further realized that any marriage plans would have to be kept secret. Knebel hadn't worked since the Christmas season at Macy's. Lillian had been asked to stay on at Wanamaker's and was still a salesgirl there. They decided to wait for the right moment when they could elope.

Naturally Laura Knebel was upset that Jack was again seeing Lillian, and the few times Jack brought Lillian to the apartment

were grim ones. He didn't help matters by playing practical jokes on his mother and, on occasion, on her guests. One evening, after insisting on bringing Lillian to a dinner his mother was having for two opera singers of relative importance, he put a "whoopee cushion" on the chair occupied by one of the singers, a lady of great proportions. When the singer sat down, the cushion gave forth with the unmistakable sound of someone farting. Knebel almost fell off the chair laughing. His mother didn't see any humor in his prank, and spent the rest of the evening apologizing to the singer and giving her son looks designed to kill.

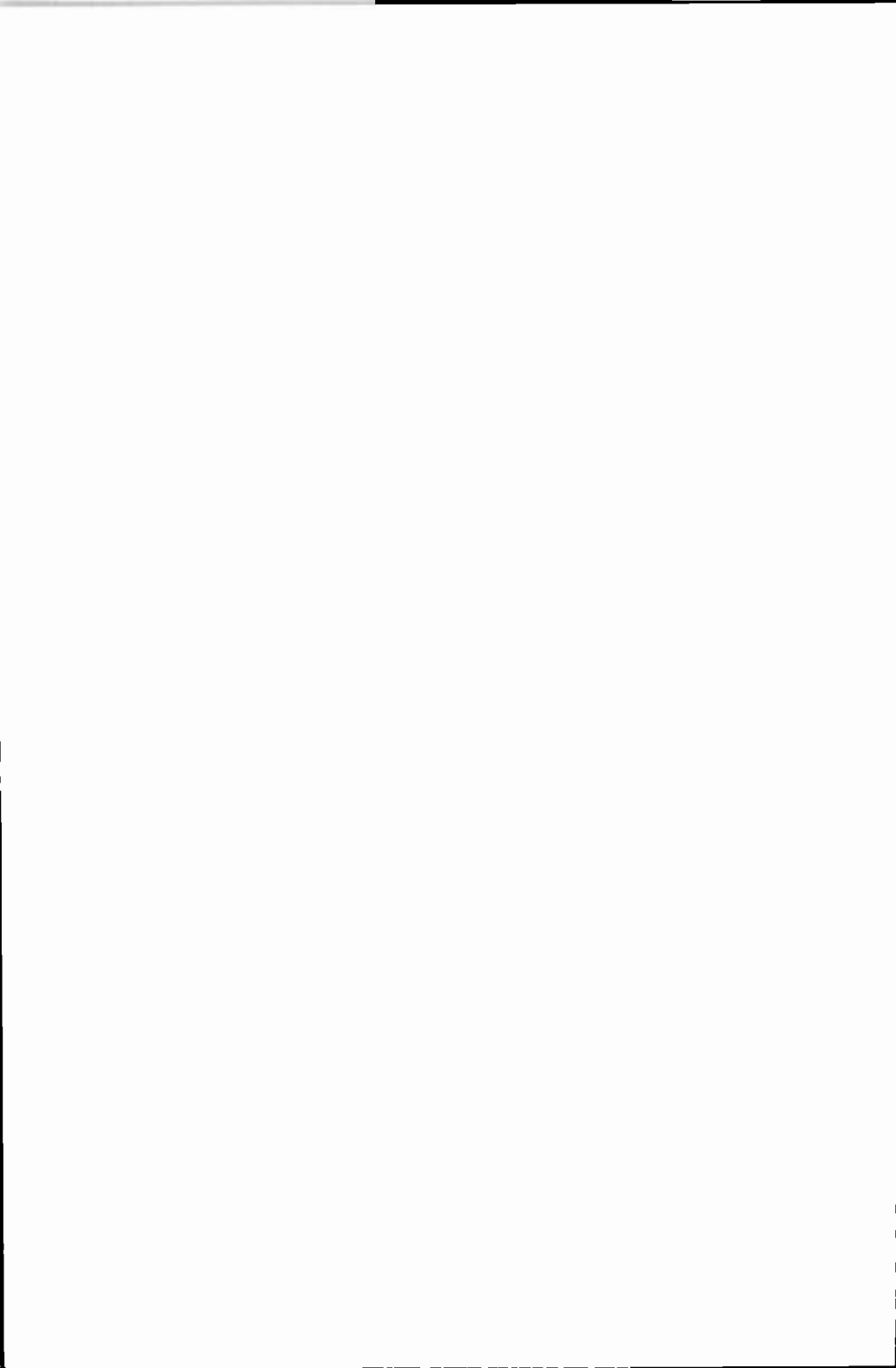
There was also Laura Knebel's intuitive feelings to be reckoned with. When she and Mr. Knebel made plans to spend the Fourth of July in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, John Aloysius' birthplace, Laura first did what she could to thwart any elopement plans that Jack and Lillian might have. She took every cent out of the house, and paid another visit to Ma Schubert, again stating her case against the marriage. Confident that she'd touched all bases, Laura and her husband left for their long weekend in the country.

As soon as his parents were gone, Jack called Lillian and told her they would get married on July 5, in West New York, New Jersey. He suggested she go to the local drugstore and tell the owner she'd lost some money, in the hope that the owner would lend her some. The druggist did, and that money bankrolled the marriage.

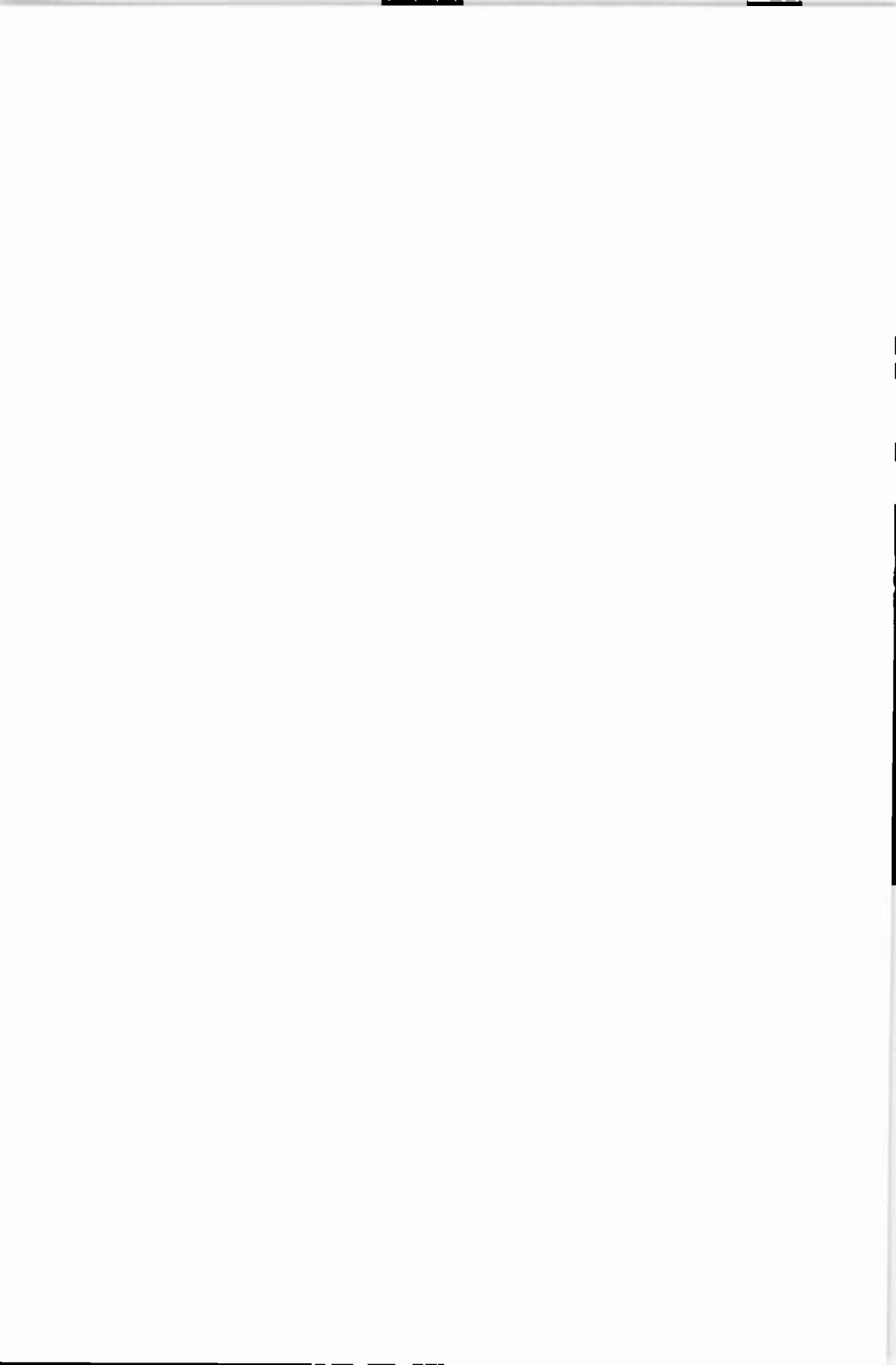
The couple arrived in West New York at nine o'clock on the morning of the fifth and went to a small Presbyterian church. The night before Knebel had prepared an envelope for whichever minister married them; the envelope contained a folded-up piece of stationery which, when held in the hand, felt like a hefty amount of cash. He'd also prepared an envelope for his best man, the identity of whom would be decided when he found someone on the street who would be willing to serve in that capacity. The first man he stopped agreed to stand in at the ceremony.

To make the deal seem sweeter, he told his best man that he owned a string of haberdashery shops in Manhattan and would send him a dozen shirts. He took down the man's size

and address, thanked him, and departed with Lillian. Today, Long John Nebel wishes he had his best man's address. If he did, he would certainly go to his favorite shirt shop, I. S. Wendley on Madison Avenue, and buy the man a dozen shirts. But in 1932, with a wife sitting at Grand Central Station while her husband of a few hours went to look for someone to shill for, the last thing on Jack Knebel's mind was squaring the guy from West New York. First, he had to square himself.



PART TWO



9

*“I-Go-Can-Please-Try-Quick-Hurry-Now-Come-Look”**

It took a while for the shock of his stepfather’s revelation to wear off. In the meantime, in that summer of 1933, Nebel was faced with the necessity of making a number of decisions. Primarily, they revolved around what steps he should take to earn a living and to support a marriage. If he had followed his natural inclinations, he would have completely severed his relationship with Sun Foot Laboratories. But in doing so he would have been giving up a gold mine, one based on his own creativity and initiative.

Until the time when he could make up his mind, Nebel turned to what he knew best—the streets of New York, where he could gather a tip and wrap it in his verbal magic. He sold juice extractors again, as well as fountain pens and crystal necklaces. He also took a fling at a more elaborate charade, the “Buddha gaff.” It was called that because it involved, in the words of the street talkers who worked it, *“The mysteries of the mind known only to the wonderful and wise Buddha.”* In reality, it was just another con game enhanced by an intricate mechanical and theatrical setup.

* Mentalists’ working code

Nebel was encouraged to try it by fellow talkers, who had begun calling him "Duke" because of his classy dress and manicured fingernails. The idea of working the Buddha gaff appealed to him; it rang more of show business than most sidewalk swindles.

To prepare himself, Nebel went to Bower's on Eighteenth Street, a store for magicians and mentalists. His buddy Jack Walsh agreed to shill, and went with him.

The man at Bower's told Nebel it would cost eighteen dollars to be outfitted for working Buddha. Between them, Nebel and Walsh had three dollars.

"I'll get the money," Nebel said. He led Walsh to a credit jewelers, told him to wait outside, and entered the store.

"I'd like to see that Hamilton you have in the window," Nebel told the store owner.

"May I recommend one of our own brands?" the jeweler said. "We carry two excellent brands. They usually sell for one hundred and seventy-five dollars, but I'm selling them this week for only seventy-five."

"No," Nebel replied, "I happen to like Hamilton. How much is this one?"

"One hundred."

Nebel turned the watch over in his hands admiringly. While he did so, the owner tried to size up his customer. "What line of business are you in?" he asked.

"Motion pictures, sir. I'm the film reviewer for *Orchestra World*." Nebel reached into his pocket and took out one of his old business cards: Jack Knebel, Cinematics Editor, *Orchestra World*.

"This is really a pleasure," the jeweler said. "You write very good reviews."

"Thank you."

Nebel knew the jeweler never heard of him or the magazine. He also knew that while it would be easier to con the jeweler out of one of his own brand watches, it would bring far less in a pawnshop than the readily recognized Hamilton name. It had to be the Hamilton.

"Well, thank you," Nebel said, putting the watch on the counter and turning as if to leave. "I'll think about it."

"What's to think about?" the jeweler asked. "Buy it now. You like Hamilton, and this is one of their finest."

"Yes, I know. I'm quite familiar with Hamilton. I've given many of them as gifts to friends in the film trade. But I'm without much cash today and I never buy on credit."

"*Never on credit!*" The jeweler shook his head unbelievably. "You're young enough to be my son, Mr. Knebel, and I would tell my son to establish credit. What if you needed an operation and didn't have cash with you? What if you were called to Hollywood suddenly and needed three or four good summer-weight suits in a hurry? You'd need credit."

Nebel smiled. "As a matter of fact that did happen to me a few months ago. They called me from Hollywood and wanted me out there immediately. My summer wardrobe was being cleaned. It was really quite a problem."

"See what I mean?"

"Yes, you're right, of course. But I'm a queer duck about things like this. When I see something I like, I want it right away. I'd just as soon forget about it if I have to wait for credit."

"So what's the problem, Mr. Knebel? Take it with you. I know you. You write very good reviews."

Nebel was in. He put the Hamilton on his wrist, gave the jeweler a phony address in a posh neighborhood, thanked him, and left the store. He stopped in a phone booth and called Jess Carlin at *Orchestra World*.

"Jess, if anyone calls for me, I've gone to Hollywood for six months, OK?"

No problem, Carlin assured him.

The next stop was a pawnshop.

"I lost heavily in a poker game," Nebel told the pawnbroker, "and I need money fast." I want forty dollars for this Hamilton."

"Twenty-five."

"All right. I'm in a spot."

After making a return trip to Bower's and purchasing the materials necessary for working Buddha, Nebel and Walsh went directly to Nebel's apartment, where Lillian was waiting. She helped them prepare the act.

The Buddha gaff is complex. When working it to a tip, the front man asks a person for a dime and has him write his

initials on a seemingly blank piece of paper, which the customer gives back to the front man. What he doesn't realize is that the paper already has a message written on it in invisible ink that remains invisible until activated by other chemicals.

Activating the ink requires elaborate rigging of the man known as Buddha. Nebel played Buddha; Walsh worked the crowd. For his role, Nebel wore a double-breasted suit; a garish turban fashioned by Lillian was perched on his head.

"He looked absolutely ridiculous," Lillian says, "but he sure stopped traffic on street corners."

Nebel's rigging for the gaff took place that night in the apartment. It involved artfully concealed lengths of rubber tubing interconnected with a rubber pouch cut to conform to the dimensions of his inside jacket pocket; two flasks—one in the side pocket of his jacket containing oil-of-tar, and one in his hip pocket filled with a foul-smelling sulphur-based chemical; and a rubber bulb (the kind used by photographers to squeeze out studio portraits) strapped under his armpit. Finally, a test tube the size of an Alka-Seltzer bottle was placed in the rubber pouch in the inside jacket pocket.

In actual practice, the Buddha gaff worked this way: The front man would bring to Buddha the piece of chemically treated paper with the customer's initials on it. After rolling it into a tight cylinder, Buddha placed the paper into the test tube nestled inside the rubber pouch.

"I am invoking the wisdom of Buddha to bring to this man [or woman] his infinite vision. Praise be to Allah! Praise be to Allah!"

As Nebel shouted this, his eyes rolling towards the heavens, he waved his arms up and down like a bird taking off. This was very important because the up-and-down motion of the arms pumped the rubber bulb under his armpit. The air from the bulb rushed through the two flasks, sending their respective fumes to the test tube where the paper had been placed. The action of the fumes on the paper brought forth the prewritten message in a sepia, handwritten script.

The prewritten messages were the most expensive part of the routine. They came in pads of a hundred 5-x-8 sheets. The first twenty pages of each pad contained entirely different messages.

Young men looking for a break in the New York show-business world: (left) Jack Knebel and Ken Billson.



Jack Knebel at the age of seventeen.



Dashing young man about town, Jack Knebel.



Long John Nebel, his first wife Lillian, and unnamed dog.



Jack Knebel, in a photograph taken in 1931, to publicize his fledgling career as a band-leader.

Lillian, taken by "John Knebel, Freelance Photographer."



Jack Knebel's mother-in-law, "Ma" Shubert, of whom he was very fond.



Long John and daughter Jackie at a New Jersey amusement park.

HERE'S why I can give you more for your dollar

Your dollar is worth more at Long John's because I believe in making a lot of sales with a profit in pennies. My overhead is low—no fancy fixtures—just a clean auction sales gallery with plenty of comfortable seats. My customers come from all parts of New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania because they know that at Long John's they get the greatest values ever seen—plus a 7-day money-back guarantee. Doing business this way has made Long John's

"The Value Center of New Jersey"

Bring the family to Long John's this week. I'll guarantee a good time will be had by all, and you may win one of the beautiful prizes. I'll be seeing you . . .



LONG JOHN'S AUCTION

PARSIPPANY, TROY HILLS, N. J., ON ROUTE 6 EAST OF BEVERWYCK RD.

Jewelry - Hardware - Appliances - Dry Goods - Clothing - Canned Goods - Novelties

New Stocks Every Week

WEDNESDAY & FRIDAY 7 to 12 P.M.

SATURDAY 2 P.M. to Midnite

A promotion piece produced by Nebel to herald his New Jersey auction house.



Long John, the auctioneer, doing some "hard sell."



The gang at Long John's New Jersey auction house. Nebel leans on a broom. Helen Noll is at far right.



A typical scene at Long John's first auction house: Helen Noll props her feet up and tries to get warm by the only source of heat.



Book publicist and author, Terry Garrity, known to millions as "J," *The Sensuous Woman*.



A recent photo of Long John Nebel.



Al Lottmann, with Candy Jones in background.



Sandy Teller.



Bandleader Sy Oliver (left)
and psychologist Milton
Kapit.

FRIENDS



Wedding guests Mr. and Mrs. Gene
Sanger.



Public-relations man, Robert
Carson.



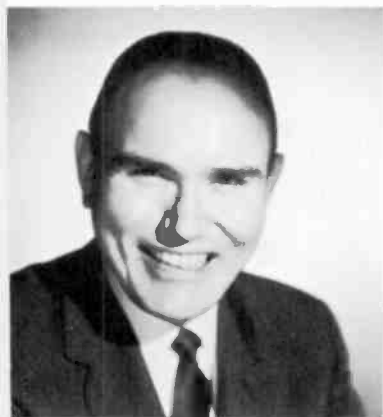
The groom greets old friend Dr. Joseph Consentino. Publisher Lyle Stuart looks on.



Attorney Kenneth Knigin.

AND PANELISTS

Cyberneticist Ben Isquith, now deceased.

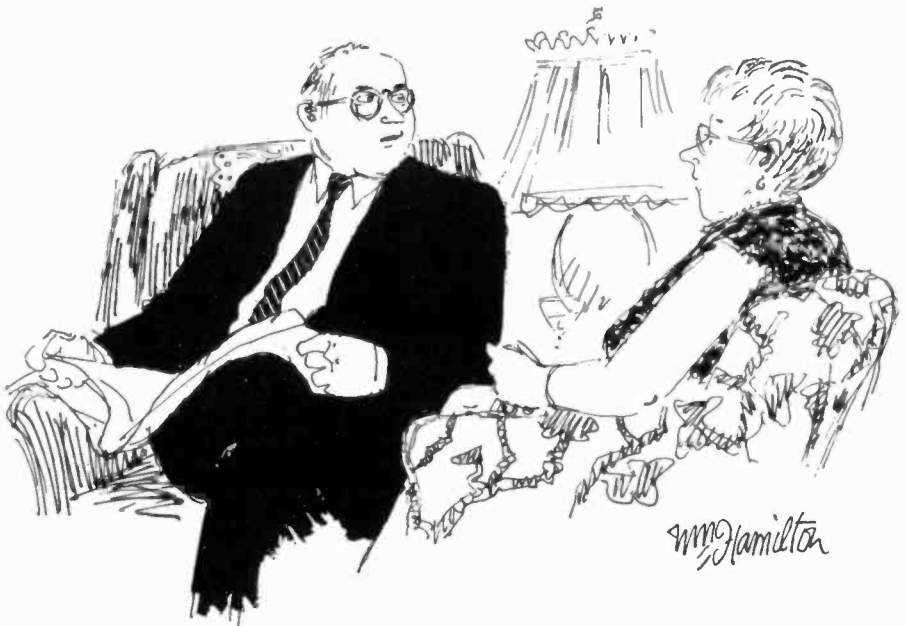


Gag writer Bob Orben.



Owner of Manny's Music Store, Danny Bergauer.
Photo by Roy Schatt

Co-host of the "Long John Nebel and Candy Jones Show," Candy Jones.



"If you want to talk, why don't you call up Long John Nebel?"

A cartoon that appeared in a September issue of *The New Yorker*.
Drawing by Wm. Hamilton © 1973, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

The next twenty pages were repeats of the first twenty. There were, however, five different pads; it was therefore possible to do a hundred messages without duplication.

Nebel and Walsh chose the corner of Thirty-fourth Street, between Eighth and Ninth avenues, to break in the act. Lillian was with them as a shill. A couple of veteran talkers, some of whom had worked Buddha before, hung around to watch and to help Duke build a tip. Soon, more than a hundred people had gathered around the tall skinny fellow in the turban.

“ . . . messages from the spirit world. . . . That’s right, friends, messages from the spirit world for only a dime. . . . Messages to you, for you, about you . . . in mid-air . . . without the aid of a pen, pencil, or any other mechanical device. . . . Just give my assistant your initials and one thin dime. . . . ”

Walsh collected the initials and dimes and handed them to Buddha. Nebel’s arms began pumping up and down as he chanted, “*Praise be to Allah!*” Out came the messages, prophecies in sepia on the same piece of blank paper on which the mystified customer had written his or her initials.

It was a grand success. Nebel worked the gaff on many corners, and eventually took the act into department stores around the city. Later, when he and Lillian again traveled the Midwest as representatives for Sun Foot, he often turned to the Buddha gaff as a means of picking up extra income. He enjoyed the show business aspects of the act, and constantly worked to refine it.

Nebel never ceased to wonder at the tip’s gullibility when confronted with a so-called mentalist. He played the role with style and a flair. No wonder so many of his radio programs have featured guests claiming to have powers of the mind beyond those of ordinary humans. The most articulate of these guests manage to get through the show without being torn apart. Those with less polished explanations are easy marks for Long John Nebel and his inside knowledge of their game.

It was not, however, all smooth sailing for Duke Nebel and his Buddha gaff. Lillian recalls one sunny day when her husband was working a midtown street corner. He was flapping his arms and praising Allah when she noticed two members of the Police Mendicant Squad approaching. Nebel saw them, too. He

slammed his keester shut, folded his tripe, and headed up the street. While the crowd watched, one of the rubber tubes suddenly fell from beneath his jacket, like a tail. It had pulled away from the flask and was dripping the foul-smelling sulphur chemical on the sidewalk.

"People started laughing," Lillian says, "but no one laughed harder than the cops."

In the fall of 1933 there was another reconciliation between John Nebel and his stepparents. It was a tentative one conducted at arm's length, but it sufficed to bring him back into the business he'd started. His new arrangement was that of an employee. He was to establish the Midwest territory for the Sun Foot line, receiving commissions from sales. He no longer held any stock in the business, having traded back to his stepfather the thirty-five shares given him in return for the rights to two other Nebel discoveries that had been incorporated into the foot-care business—a recipe for Old World Herb Tea, and an anatomical mannequin showing the internal organs of the human body. Nebel liked working with visual displays, and he *loved* medicine. He was very much at home talking about the human body. The mannequin was a great attention-grabber. After building a tip with it, and after a long discourse in which the needs of various parts of the body, pointed out on the mannequin, were discussed, Nebel went into the pitch for the tea.

“. . . blended together from twenty-one of nature's most precious ingredients by a world-renowned pharmaceutical firm to give your body renewed health, increased vitality and, my friends, even heightened sexual vigor. . . . Only one dollar per package for this miraculous tea, and only one package per customer. The ingredients contained in this package of health are extremely scarce, and I. . . .”

John and Lillian left for Milwaukee on Christmas Eve, 1933. It was to be a brief trip, just long enough for him to establish locations in department and drug stores and to recruit and train demonstrators. After setting up Milwaukee, Nebel stopped in Chicago to show Lillian his hometown. The visit turned into a seven-year stay. They weren't to return to New York for more than an occasional brief visit until 1940.

The Chicago years for the young couple were fun. For the first time there was plenty of money and they lived comfortably. Lillian occasionally encouraged John to ask his stepfather for a higher draw against the commissions on sales. When he did, he was always met with a refusal. "We've got to pyramid the business, Jack," his stepfather always replied. "The money has to keep going back in the business until it's solid."

Young Nebel really didn't care too much about the money from Sun Foot. He had too many other things going for him, many of them direct spin-offs from the Sun Foot activities. Once he established a demonstration location for the foot-care products, he found it easy to use that space to sell other things, such as Old World Herb Tea. The stores didn't care what Nebel or his demonstrators sold as long as it wasn't blatantly illegal, and as long as they received their twenty-five percent cut of the take for providing the space. At one time in Chicago, Nebel had eighty-five daily demonstrations going simultaneously. He'd found and trained a virtual army of demonstrators for Sun Foot. This effective corps of demonstrators left Nebel with time on his hands and, for the first time since his marriage, some discretionary income. He bought a big red Pontiac convertible and a Chihuahua. His and Lillian's first trip back to New York was made in the car, the dog sitting between them all the way. They stayed only a week while Lillian visited with her mother and sister, and John spent time discussing business with his stepfather. But he took one day to display to his old friend Ken Billson the success he'd achieved. He drove down to the Western Electric plant and set up a keester and tripe on the sidewalk. The dog looked on from the front seat as Nebel went into his pitch for the six-dozen juice extractors he'd purchased on his way downtown. When Billson came out of the building at lunchtime, he did a double take. After much warm handshaking, he stood back and watched Nebel sell extractors to his co-workers at the plant.

"He loved to put on a show for me," Billson comments. "He had to show me how he'd hit it big with the red car and all. I knew it wouldn't last too long and that soon he'd be back rubbing two nickels together. But when he had it, he loved to flaunt it. After he left, the guys I worked with kept asking who

the guy was in the plaid jacket with the car and dog. I guess I enjoyed it, too, being buddies with a flashy guy who impressed the fellows I worked with."

Nebel worked Western Electric every time he visited New York. He and Lillian also dropped in on the Billsons at home one afternoon. Ken recalls answering the door and being confronted with what he describes as "white leather luggage from here to there." The Nebels took the Billsons for a drive that day to Long Island where they visited a mutual friend. "It was the most chopped-up damn ride I ever had," says Billson. "Nebel could never just get in a car and go. He had to keep stopping every few miles for ice cream or candy or peanuts. And he always bought for everybody."

The Nebels lived in a variety of places during their five years in Chicago. When times were good, they lived in hotels, their favorite of which was three blocks from Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs. Nebel has absolutely no interest in sports of any kind. He didn't in the thirties, either, but he enjoyed the baseball players who lived in the hotel. They were flashy, flamboyant characters who appealed to the flashy, flamboyant Nebel. He became disenchanted with them, however, after an incident involving a young dancer. She had lived in the hotel for months, but didn't always have enough money to pay the weekly rent. In those days, hotel management used what was known as a "French key." This, inserted in the doors of tenants who were behind in their rent, made it impossible for the tenant to use his or her own key to get back into the room. The dancer, knowing that if she left her room she'd be unable to return, never went out. For a while, she charged food at a local coffee shop, but after falling behind in her payment to them, they refused to deliver any more food.

It would have been a hopeless situation if one of the hotel's colored bellboys didn't take it upon himself to help her out. He periodically brought her a hamburger and coffee, tapping lightly on her door after looking up and down the hall to make sure no one was watching. She'd open the door enough to allow him to slip the food through, whisper her thanks, and bolt the door shut again.

Nebel became friendly with the bellboy when he discovered that the bellboy lived close to a drugstore on the South Side where Nebel was selling Sun Foot and Old World Herb Tea. The bellboy worked nights, and Nebel drove him home in the morning on his way to the store. The bellboy told him about the dancer's plight. It struck a responsive chord in Nebel, and he decided to launch a drive to collect money for the girl. He didn't intend to give the money to her. What he wanted was to collect from other tenants the forty dollars she owed the hotel (a large sum in those years), and perhaps a little more to enable her to pay her rent ahead a few months so she could feel free to leave her room and look for a job in a chorus line. Nebel felt it would be easy to collect five dollars apiece from the ballplayers and other relatively well-to-do tenants. He soon discovered he was wrong. He was unable to persuade even one person to contribute to the fund. Disgusted, he gave up the idea, not even contributing money of his own.

One evening, upon returning from the South Side to the hotel, he was met in the lobby by the bellboy. The dancer had jumped from her tenth-floor room that afternoon. She had lived a half hour.

The dancer's death troubled Nebel, as do most stories in which death and its ramifications dominate. He kept saying over and over to Lillian that all it would have taken to save her life was a lousy five bucks from eight or ten people. What really troubled him, however, was the ease with which money was collected for the dancer *after* her death. Nebel put a cardboard box on the hotel's front desk, and hand-lettered a sign explaining that the box was for donations to cover the girl's funeral expenses. Within two days he'd collected almost three hundred dollars. Money came easier than time. Nebel was the only one from the hotel to attend her funeral. Long John Nebel attends many funerals. He believes a friend needs people when he's about to be buried or cremated.

"I'd like to think that my friends would come to my funeral but they probably won't," Nebel told me one night in his apartment during a particularly low moment. He had been talking for hours about death, and his desire to bring about his own

demise. He occasionally broke down and cried this particular morning, something that was occurring with increasing regularity during the latter part of 1971 and early 1972.

"You know what happens, don't you?" he asked me. "Everybody is busy with a business appointment or a family crisis and you just get shoved into the furnace while some old guy who's paid to be there watches. That's what happened to Winchell, you know. He helped so many people, and the only ones who showed up were a few close friends and the clergyman who was paid to be there. Do you know what I'd like at my funeral? I'd like Sy Oliver to play trumpet and Phil Moore to play piano, and maybe they could play a few of my favorite songs, like 'My Way,' and 'Have I Ever Lived?' But nobody really gives a god-damn, and I suppose I'll be alone then."

People who know him agree that no one in their collective experience dwells upon the subject of death as much as John Nebel. He is simultaneously fascinated by it and frightened of it. During his periods of depression, program after program drifts into a discussion of death, regardless of the show's original subject matter. I recall one show in particular with writer-director Elia Kazan. We began talking about Kazan's book, *The Assassins*. During a commercial break, Nebel began probing Kazan about his attitudes toward death. Did Kazan fear death? Did he condone suicide? When we went back on the air, death remained the topic.

But to return to the late thirties—Nebel, "The Mystic," was always in the wings, and he and Lillian began doing mind-reading acts in the Midwestern towns they visited on behalf of Sun Foot. He gave up working the Buddha gaff because the rigging was too cumbersome, and turned to the more classic form of mind-reading in which a code is employed.

The verbal code used by working mentalists, though simple in conception, requires mental alertness, verbal dexterity, and hours of practice. The ten words in the code used by Nebel were *I, Go, Can, Please, Try, Quick, Hurry, Now, Come, and Look*. They are always used in exactly that sequence.

The act was billed as *The Great Socrates*. Because transmitting the code was the hardest part, Nebel's partner donned the turban and stayed onstage, while Nebel ventured into the

audience. Once there, he would ask a man to whisper to him his birthdate. To illustrate, let us say it was March 6, 1911.

"Can you quick give me the date of this man's birthday?" Nebel would ask his partner.

"It was . . . March six," the partner would reply, after delaying an appropriate length of time to indicate the mental strain he was undergoing. He knew the date because of the words Nebel used in asking the question. He first used the code word "can" which was the third word in the sequence. March is the third month of the year. The second code word he used was "quick," the sixth letter in the code sequence. Thus Nebel's partner knew the day was the sixth.

"The year, Mental Marvel," Nebel said. "I wish to know what year this man was born. I'll ask him to repeat it to me, Great Socrates." Nebel told his partner two facts by his phrasing of the question. (It was assumed that everyone was born in the twentieth century, thus avoiding the need to spell out nineteen.) The first word he used in the question was "I," the first word in the code sequence; the partner knew, therefore, that the first digit of the two he needed to know was a one. Had the second digit been different from the first, Nebel would have used the correct word in the code to indicate what it was. Since it was the same digit as the first one, he simply used the word "repeat."

The code was used for many things. Part of the act was to read off the serial number on a dollar bill. This feat was accomplished in stages, three digits at a time, with Nebel tossing in theatrical chitchat between stages.

There was an accompanying code used to identify items taken from someone in the audience. For instance, the fourth word in the accompanying code was "tie." If Nebel took a man's tie for his blindfolded partner to identify, he asked the question, using the fourth word in the numerical code sequence—"please." His partner then knew that they were doing items now, and simply matched up codes.

Actually, there were many codes used by mentalists. They were contained in a large book that sold for a hundred dollars. Nebel bought the book and was in the process of learning new codes from it when he stumbled upon a "talking teakettle" in a magic shop in Columbus, Ohio. He bought it and worked it

in small nightclubs around the Midwest. The kettle, black and shiny, contained an induction coil that enabled someone else, usually stationed in the basement of the room, to hear what was being said and to talk back through the kettle. The area of a room in which Nebel worked was crucial; if he strayed outside a carefully defined radius, his partner in the basement could no longer hear or transmit, a situation that occurred too often for Nebel's fragile nerves. He returned to working with codes, and included horoscope readings in the act.

The horoscope addition to Nebel's mentalist act became a popular moneymaker. He and Lillian began traveling in wider circles, going as far south as Washington, D. C., and as far West as Nebraska and South Dakota. Nebel, in his turban, sold horoscopes in department stores, on street corners, and in nightclubs. He found great success in Washington, D. C., where the large black population began flocking to him to receive their "lucky numbers." For an extra quarter, Nebel would not only give a customer his horoscope; he'd also give him a lucky number that, when used for betting on numbers, horses, or any other gambling activity, was "guaranteed to win." There was one caution Nebel issued, however, when giving a lucky number: the number would not be lucky if used too soon. He therefore gave each person a date when the number's mysterious luck would appear—a date, needless to say, that came after he had left town.

Smaller cities and towns responded to the act with awe and respect. In Reading, Pennsylvania, a farmer came to the Nebels' hotel and paid every cent he had to be told how to avoid losing his farm. Another time, Nebel agreed to go to a woman's home to give her the benefit of private astrological counseling. It turned out to be a funeral home. Nebel did an about-face and returned to the hotel.

It was all fun traveling from town to town in the red Pontiac. When necessary, Nebel returned to Chicago or Milwaukee to keep tabs on Sun Foot. He also set up demonstrations in many smaller cities, and would stop in on the way through to receive the firm's cut from the demonstrator. There's no telling how long John and Lillian would have stayed in the Midwest had not a phone call from New York caught up with them while they were back in Chicago. It was from the superintendent of the

Ardley Arcade, informing Nebel that Laura Knebel had been badly burned, and his stepfather less so, in a fire in the Sun Foot lab. The highly explosive collodion, one of the base products in the foot-care line, had ignited one afternoon, setting the entire lab ablaze. A young girl working there at the time was also seriously burned.

John flew to New York, arriving on April 28, 1937, one day after his mother died. The young girl was also dead. John Aloysius was confined to a hospital for almost a month, thus missing his wife's funeral, which was held in Kilbourne, Wisconsin, the burial place of John's real mother and father. John arranged the funeral for his stepmother, and accompanied her body to Chicago and thence to Kilbourne on the train. After the burial, he returned to Chicago and performed demonstrations for various products until his stepfather recovered from his injuries and drove to Chicago to visit him and Lillian.

John Aloysius arrived in a new Cadillac. During his visit, he suggested that Nebel lend him fifteen hundred dollars with which to purchase a lavish tombstone for Laura's grave. Nebel had received that amount as his share of the sale of his grandmother's house in Wisconsin. John Aloysius said he would kick in his share at a later date, so Nebel gave him the money. He never saw his stepfather's share, and a stone was never placed on the grave.

The Sun Foot line was continued under John Aloysius' leadership. He installed flameproof manufacturing facilities in New York and made a handsome living from the firm. For John Nebel in Chicago, however, his interest ended with the death of his mother. He became involved in various schemes, including the manufacturing and sale of ladies' scarfs. He bought the pattern for the scarfs from a man in Chicago, and together with Lillian, manufactured them in their hotel room. One day, he was approached by a man who told him he was setting up concessions for the Golden Gate International Exposition being held on Treasure Island, off San Francisco. He offered Nebel prime booth space from which he could sell his scarfs. Nebel accepted the offer, and he and Lillian headed for California. Once there, however, he decided he didn't like the deal. In order to really make the space pay, he had to have large quantities

of scarfs, and everything was unionized in California, making the cost of manufacturing large quantities prohibitive. He considered having them made in Chicago, but shipping costs would boost the cost beyond what he considered reasonable. They turned around and went back to the Midwest.

By this time, Lillian was homesick. The Midwest had been interesting, but she began to feel urges for New York. Nebel fought her feelings, although underneath he, too, was beginning to tire of Chicago and their life there. The final few months in Chicago found him working nights as a professional poker dealer in back-room gambling joints. This was not as drastic a departure from Nebel's usual interests as it might seem. He and Lillian loved cards, and played often. On the other hand, any real knowledge Nebel had of the finer points of poker came from books he'd read and from close scrutiny of a Greek poker dealer in Chicago known as Bendover George.

Nebel has always been a fast study. He has the ability to pick up the essence of a man's expertise within minutes, an attribute essential to the free-wheeling manner in which he conducts his radio show. After observing Bendover George, Nebel was confident he could be an effective poker dealer. As a dealer he was good, although he usually lost his earnings—which averaged out to about five dollars an hour, including tips from winners—as a player at other tables.

"We came back to New York in early nineteen-forty," Lillian Knebel says. "I was glad to be back, and I think Jack was, too. The marriage had lost something, no doubt about that. Jack was very worried about his future and had become difficult to live with, always picking on me for little things that weren't just right. He was very depressed a lot of the time, although there was always that mind working over how he could make a big score."

For some time after he and Lillian returned to New York, Nebel didn't do much of anything. He hung around the apartment they took on East Seventy-first Street, venturing out occasionally for long walks and a hot dog from a sidewalk vendor. He was tired of selling. He wanted to move into something that would lead him back into the more glamorous world of show business.

"I didn't know what to do," Nebel says, recalling that first year back in New York. "I'd developed an interest in photography but didn't know what to do with it, at least at first. I felt I could be a good photographer, but I didn't know how to start."

10

Love in a Dark Room

For most people, the idea of transforming a hobby into a profession takes certain predictable roads. You study and practice the hobby until you've reached professional standards and then, only then, do you venture out into your new world, part-time at first, cautious, humble.

Not John Nebel. His first move was to buy a new-model range-finder Kodak camera. He took some pictures with it, and experimented in a friend's darkroom with processing and printing. He wasn't very good at darkroom work. His early photographs weren't very good, either. But the fact that the pictures came out, black and white, on paper, was enough proof for him that he was ready.

Nebel's plan for entering the photographic field was to buy a trailer and set off across the country taking pictures for *Life* magazine. *Life* wasn't aware of his plan because Nebel didn't bother to tell its editorial staff. It's just as well he didn't announce his intentions because they never went beyond the idea stage. Once, after working as a celebrity photographer, he did submit photographs to *Life*. The editor was kind and

patient, but refused to buy any of his photos or to suggest the promise of future assignments.

Shooting pictures for *Life* was not really that appealing to Nebel anyway. It would have meant sloshing through the mud in search of human interest. Human interest he could tolerate. Never mud.

He began receiving small assignments from New York press agents to shoot publicity photographs of show business personalities. This kind of work suited him. It didn't demand advanced knowledge of the photographic medium, and it brought him into daily contact with the people he most enjoyed, performers.

It didn't take long for Nebel to become a sought-after publicity photographer. It wasn't that his camera technique was that good. It had more to do with the way he handled his celebrity subjects and with his creativity in coming up with interesting and newsworthy locations for the pictures. He loved posing the stars coming through subway turnstiles, or rooftops, in unlikely buildings, places where they never went in real life. His work caught the attention of editors at such fan magazines as *Photoplay*, *Screen Guide*, *Movieland*, and *Harrison's Beauty Parade*. He worked with Kurt Gunther, still a prominent free-lance photographer, and with Lenny Uflan and Gary Wagner, and photographed most of the big-name stars of the day. At times, he took them to his apartment on Seventy-first Street, where he had painted one wall of the living room a dull white to use as a portrait backdrop, and had partitioned off part of the bedroom as a darkroom. The bathroom was always filled with prints hanging to dry which, in a reverse situation from the wife's stockings always being in the way, drove Lillian up the wall.

"I never had a home with Jack," she says, "always a factory or office or studio. If we weren't making eyeglass cleaner on our honeymoon or rigging up Buddha gaffs or cutting scarfs, we were shooting and processing pictures. I got pretty tired of it after awhile."

Nebel's use of the apartment was, at times, interesting for Lillian. She met many familiar names from the entertainment and modeling world. She particularly remembers her husband taking seminude shots of stripper Lili St. Cyr against the painted living room wall. She also recalls his photographing the nation's

most successful model, Candy Jones, who later married Harry Conover, founder of one of the nation's most famous modeling agencies.

"Candy Jones was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen," Lillian says, recalling that day in their apartment.

One press agent, Bill Doll, was especially good to Nebel, giving him a great deal of work photographing his clients. Nebel liked Doll's flamboyant manner. "Bill always smoked dollar cigars, even if he had to borrow the buck," says Nebel.

As Nebel became more and more involved in photography for a living, his marriage deteriorated further. He always seemed to be out working, sometimes staying away for days at a time. In between publicity assignments, he photographed weddings at posh hotels, and shot cover photos for Fawcett Publications' detective and confession magazines. His answer to Lillian's complaints was to put her to work. He sent her to a woman named Harriet, who did all his photo retouching. Lillian took lessons from Harriet, and began doing some of the retouching herself. She was good at it, but not good enough for her husband. She claims he constantly harped on the quality of her work, even though she knew she was doing it as good as Harriet had done it. Lillian says: "I suppose it had more to do with our general relationship than with what he was complaining about at the time. Everything I did was wrong—the retouching, the way I kept the apartment, the things I said. I got so I couldn't stand it, and even left him a few times, packing up a small suitcase and staying with my mother. Wouldn't you know, though, that she always took his side and told me I was wrong. I'd go back to him and listen to him complain for awhile before leaving again. My mother would yell at me. Back I'd go. I couldn't win."

America's entry into World War II in 1941 had its effect on everyone, including John Nebel. An immediate rationing of photographic chemicals, film, and paper went into effect, crimping every photographer's style. Also, photographers were being drafted as quickly as any other available men. Nebel received his notice to report for his physical. He was not against serving in the armed forces as long as he didn't have to carry a rifle and go to the front. He made some calls to influential friends in the entertainment business, and after the pulling of a few strings, he

was told he might have a chance as a Marine Corps photographer. First, however, he had to take his general induction physical as scheduled.

He reported on a bitter cold February day in 1942 to Grand Central Palace, where facilities had been set up. But he wasn't wanted by the military on two physical counts: first, he was six feet, four inches tall, and weighed 127 pounds. Too skinny, according to recruiting. Also, his vision was too poor for him to be accepted. As is the procedure in military physicals, however, he was not washed out at this stage of the examination process. He had to go through the entire routine, which meant undergoing a psychiatric examination.

Still naked following the physical portion of the exam, Nebel waited in line to see the psychiatrist. He was finally ushered into a draped booth and told to sit on a canvas chair. The psychiatrist scanned the records on the desk before him.

"You're married, I see," he muttered.

"Yes, sir," Nebel replied.

"How often do you have intercourse?"

"Pardon me, sir?"

"Intercourse. How often?"

"Sir, I'm afraid I don't understand," Nebel was shivering with cold and apprehension. He knew what intercourse meant, but couldn't relate it to the situation.

"Fucking, Nebel. How often do you fuck?"

Nebel blushed and shivered again. He started to say he didn't keep a scoreboard when the psychiatrist grunted and handed him back his papers. He scribbled something on one of them. "Take these to the desk, Nebel."

The sergeant behind the desk took the sheaf of papers from Nebel, opened it to selected pages, and pounded them with a large rubber stamp. He handed them back and instructed Nebel to get dressed before turning in the papers to still another sergeant at another desk. Nebel dressed quickly. He peeked in his file before making his final stop. The stamp used by the sergeant read: Rejected. On the psychiatric page the psychiatrist had written: Unfit for any branch of the armed forces.

Nebel walked out into the street feeling defeated and inferior. It took a few hours before he realized that what had hap-

pened was not a tragedy. He was simply 4F, momentarily tough on the ego but not without its compensations.

He went back to working as a photographer. Business had slowed down drastically. The war was center stage; starlets had been relegated to minor roles in the national production. Besides, rationing made it almost impossible to obtain photographic supplies. Nebel gave the problem some thought and came up with an obvious answer. He needed an income. He needed supplies. So he applied for a job with Willoughby's, the city's largest photographic chain store.

Nebel walked into the main Willoughby store on West Thirty-second Street and asked for the manager. The clerk pointed out a well-dressed man in the rear of the store who, he said, was the president. Nebel approached him, introduced himself, and went into a hard-sell on his photographic background and how it could apply to the betterment of Willoughby's. His approach was a mistake. The firm was old-line, steeped in tradition. Hard-sell went against the Willoughby grain. Before Nebel realized it, the president dismissed him. "I have no doubt you have photographic knowledge, Mr. Nebel, and that you could answer my questions about the field. But I don't think you would fit into our organization. Thank you for stopping by."

Nebel was annoyed. He'd been a frequent customer in the store and was certain he not only knew more about photography than most of the clerks, but could damn well sell rings around them. He got the name of a vice-president of the store, called him, name-dropped, and was granted an interview. He toned down his pitch, and a week later was working as a sales clerk for thirty-five dollars a week.

The job looked as if it were going to pay off as Nebel had hoped. Besides his salary, he began earning commissions by selling what was known as PM—push merchandise. These were items that the store was anxious to get rid of and was willing to pay a small commission to any salesman successful in moving them. Nebel carefully studied the PM and made an extra effort to sell it. He soon became the most successful pusher of PM in the store, earning more in commissions each week than his salary. This didn't endear him to his fellow sales clerks, which is the price one pays for aggressive sales efforts. It was especially

true in Nebel's case because he used many of the flamboyant sales tactics he'd learned on the streets. He liked to gather a tip of eight or ten people and go to work on them in the middle of the store. One item, outsized printing paper discarded by the army, was an especially fast mover for Nebel. The sheets were 10-by-10 inches, instead of the customary 8-by-10 size. In Nebel's hands, the bastard size became a thing of distinct advantage to every amateur photographer in the tip.

He was always careful, however, not to practice his street-selling techniques when the firm's president was in the store; the extra money earned from selling push merchandise was not that important to him. His outside photography work began to pick up, and he received many calls to photograph weddings, which was one of the more lucrative forms of free-lance photography, *provided* you had access to large quantities of printing paper and film to satisfy the expansive buying habits of jubilant wedding parties. The tiny ration of supplies available to Nebel as an employee were not sufficient to meet the demand.

Nebel did what he has always been good at doing. He made friends with some of the buyers of bulk photographic supplies. A few of them agreed to increase their orders, with Nebel buying back from them a portion of it. It was against every policy of the Willoughby company, but it did not, in fact, hurt them. The increased order meant increased income for the store. Of course, there were times when Nebel talked the bulk buyer into purchasing PM items, not only gaining supplies for himself, but a commission on top. *Venia necessitati datur!* His wedding work picked up, and his income on the outside soon matched his salary and commissions from the store. Meanwhile, the apartment smelled like a chemical plant. The kitchen floor was stained with developer and fixer. Supplies, prints, and photographic equipment littered every room.

A new president came to Willoughby's—one with a different personality from the retired one. He openly admired Nebel's sales techniques, and was always willing to sit down and talk with him. One of the things Nebel suggested to the new president was that he be allowed to get rid of the tan smock he wore as a clerk. He said he owned an extensive wardrobe which could be put to good use in the store. He also suggested that

he be given new status as a roving expert, going from department to department to talk with amateur photographers and to help them with their problems. The new president bought the idea, and Nebel soon began showing up at work in the suits he'd worn during his show business days.

Nebel did other things in the store that caught management's attention. There was a bulletin board on the second-floor balcony on which notices of importance to sales personnel were posted. Each employee was required to read the notices daily. Few, however, did.

Nebel, aware of the other employees' reluctance to go upstairs to read the bulletin board, went out and purchased a number of large picture frames. He stayed late one night, made copies of the week's notices, and inserted them into each of the frames. He attached the frames to the inside of each of the six stalls in the employees' men's room. His theory was that if there was any location where a man's attention was captured, it was in front of his eyes when he sat down on a toilet.

It was a few days before management became aware of the notices in the stalls and asked some of the clerks who had posted them. Assuming management was upset over the idea, the clerks quickly pointed to Nebel. When Nebel was confronted by the new president, he had momentary regrets; the tone of the president's opening statements seemed hostile. But the tone quickly changed. The president congratulated Nebel on his initiative. He asked him how much he'd spent for the frames. Nebel told him thirty dollars. The president had a check made out for that amount, patted Nebel on the back, and returned him to his role of roving photography expert.

"Jack was working day and night," Lillian says. "He put in long hours at the store, and even longer hours shooting as a freelance photographer. Things continued to get worse at home. He was obsessed about becoming a success. It meant everything in the world to him to get ahead. It meant less and less to me. I just wanted a home with a normally ambitious husband. Still, when I'd complain to my mother, she'd point out how lucky I was to have married a man who wanted to succeed. She was right. And she was wrong."

Nebel's next step up the Willoughby ladder was a promotion

to outside sales. Because of wartime rationing, outside salesman for the store really didn't sell, for they couldn't deliver anything if they did. What they were supposed to do was to appease big customers. Large portrait studios, accustomed to buying five hundred sheets a month of fine portrait paper like Opal G, had to be content with a monthly delivery of only one hundred sheets. The outside salesmen tried to keep them happy despite the short supply, hoping to maintain them as customers when the war was over. Nebel loved the job. He enjoyed visiting top photographers and shooting the breeze with them, something no one does better than he. He still had to work as a clerk inside the store on Saturdays, but that was a small price to pay for those glorious and free days during the week. He was even able to steal a little time during the day to shoot free-lance assignments, but only when the assignment was particularly lucrative. Everything was looking up, except his marriage to Lillian. And, as often happens in such circumstances, his male antenna extended itself to receive previously jammed messages from other females. His first clear-channel reception was transmitted by the wife of a gentleman Nebel met during his rounds for Willoughby's. We shall call her Jenny and her husband, Paul.

Jenny was, according to everyone who knew her, a ravishing beauty. Her husband Paul was an acknowledged expert in the electronics field. Nebel first visited Paul's shop in Manhattan to see about having an electric photographic gadget modified. He was greeted by a beautiful woman, who turned out to be Jenny. They talked a while before Paul came out from the back of the shop and joined them.

Nebel liked them both, and stopped in the shop whenever he was in the neighborhood. Occasionally, Jenny was there, and that mysterious chemistry that occurs between men and women began to bubble.

Although Nebel admits he was strongly attracted to Jenny, he did not make a pass at her. As it turned out, he didn't have to—Jenny's husband made it for him. Paul called him at Willoughby's one morning and said he was going to have to cancel a lunch date with his wife because of business. He hated to disappoint her, but had no choice. Would Nebel be a friend and take her to lunch?

Nebel and Jenny went to a small neighborhood restaurant. Towards the end of lunch, Jenny told John she found him to be a very attractive man, one in whom she could become interested. Her comments made him nervous—and hopeful.

They had lunch together a few more times, Paul joining them on occasion but more often begging off for business reasons. During this period, Paul borrowed a small sum of money from Nebel, which he paid back within a week. Their friendship was growing, a situation that only further confused Nebel's feelings about Jenny. Up until this point, nothing physical had taken place between them. Nebel's fear of alienating Paul was enough to keep it that way.

Then, one afternoon, he received a phone call from Paul, inviting him to a surprise birthday party for Jenny at their home in New Jersey on Saturday. Nebel told Paul he'd check with Lillian to see if she would be free that night. Paul suggested it might be nicer for Nebel to come alone, and referred obliquely to Nebel's appearance at the party as having something to do with Jenny's birthday gift. Nebel demurred, promising to call Paul back within a few days. It's unclear whether the party invitation precipitated another breakup with Lillian; neither she nor Nebel recalls whether it did or not. The bottom line, however, was that Lillian packed up and went home to her mother's apartment within a day or two after Paul's invitation to John.

Nebel declined Paul's invitation to the birthday party. Had he accepted, he would have been involved in the following scenario. Paul had planned to have Nebel picked up at the train at seven-thirty. The timing was important to Paul's plan—Nebel's arrival at the house in New Jersey was part of a choreographed schedule of gift-giving. Jenny was to start opening her presents at seven. At seven-thirty she would open what appeared to be her major gift, a mink coat from her husband. Then, when the doorbell rang, Paul would whisper to her that there was an even bigger gift than mink, and it was waiting for her at the door. John Nebel was to have been that bigger gift.

Nebel did spend subsequent weekends with Paul and Jenny. Paul was usually absent all day Sunday, leaving Nebel and Jenny to enjoy their relationship that lasted about three months. Paul's absence from the house was not altruism. He had fallen

in love with the wife of a business associate and spent most of his Sundays with her.

The Monday mornings following those weekends usually found Nebel having a congenial breakfast with Paul and Jenny. She cooked bacon and eggs for Nebel, and washed and ironed his shirt, prompting Paul to complain that she seldom did those things for him.

The entanglement with Paul and Jenny followed as bizarre a course as its inception might promise. Once, on a rainy Sunday, Paul and Jenny were scheduled to attend his secretary's wedding. Paul's parents were visiting at the time, which posed a dilemma for Paul. He wanted to spend the day with his lady friend; Nebel wanted the day alone with Jenny. It was decided that Paul and Jenny would dress for the wedding and leave the house together. Jenny would then board a train for New York City to spend the afternoon with Nebel at his apartment. (Lillian, once again, had gone home to her mother.) Paul would go on to see his paramour. That evening, they would all meet, and Jenny and Paul would return home.

Paul was afraid, however, that when he and Jenny didn't show up at the wedding, the bride and groom would call the house, upsetting his parents. The solution was simple. Paul went into the basement and cut his own phone wires.

Jenny arrived at Nebel's apartment dressed in a long gown. They spent the afternoon together. The phone rang at six. It was Nebel's old friend Jack Walsh, who'd just arrived in New York and wanted to spend some time with him. Nebel invited him up for coffee, and later Walsh agreed to drive Jack and Jenny back to New Jersey to a deserted parking lot where Paul was waiting in his car. Jenny got into Paul's car and they went home, raving to his parents about the ceremony and reception. Paul respliced his phone lines, and Nebel went back to Manhattan with Walsh.

Nebel's job as an outside salesman for Willoughby's, his freelance photographic work, and his affair with Jenny kept him away from home except for only brief visits. And, as though his life wasn't complex enough at this point, he added further complications to it when he met Helen Noll.

At the time of their first meeting, Helen was running the Grand

Central branch of the E. L. Jenkins Company, a firm specializing in passport and employee identification photos. She had originally been hired as a bookkeeper by Thomas Worrall, who had purchased the business from Jenkins. He didn't know anything about photography, but he was a good businessman. When he decided to open an uptown branch in Grand Central Station, he asked Helen to manage it for him. She moved uptown in 1929.

In August 1940, Helen, whose maiden name was Berger, married Chris Noll, a blonde, blue-eyed athletic man who worked as a knitter in the garment industry. She continued working for E. L. Jenkins after her marriage, and had, by this time, become an indispensable employee. When she learned, in 1944, that the owner intended to sell the business, she made an offer to buy the firm. She and Chris scraped up sixteen hundred dollars, and Helen became the owner of E. L. Jenkins. She owns it to this day.

Nebel visited her after a vice-president at Willoughby's received a phone call from Helen in 1944, right after she became the company's owner. The salesman who regularly serviced the account hadn't shown up in a month. The vice-president sent Nebel to appease her. After a long conversation in the office, Nebel took her to the first of many lunches.

"I was desperate for conversation," Helen Noll says, reflecting on her relationship with Nebel. "And he was one of the best conversationalists I'd ever met. At first, I thought he was just a slick salesman, but after a while I realized he was a sensitive guy who was as confused as I was."

Nebel continued his affair with Jenny. Lillian, despite her growing suspicions, remained silent. She found a certain calm settling over the marriage. He was still difficult about small, insignificant things, but their relationship, matured by battle fatigue, was improving. The Nebels became friendly with the Nolls. Lillian often visited Helen's office, and Chris and Helen spent a few evenings with John and Lillian at their apartment. At the same time, the Nebels' friendship with Jenny and Paul progressed. Through it all, Nebel managed to maintain a relative calm.

The affair with Helen blossomed during the second year,

when John openly expressed his love to her while she was in the darkroom, developing film.

"He said he was madly in love with me and wanted to spend his life with me," Helen says. "I wasn't in love with him at the time, although maybe I was and didn't know it. All I knew was I liked being with him."

The gifts began to flow. Nebel has always been a compulsive gift-giver to the women in his life. One afternoon, a man in a peaked cap arrived at Helen's office with a package from Abercrombie & Fitch. It was a gold cigarette lighter. He bought her a watch with money he got by hocking one of his cameras. They spent almost every lunch hour strolling along the East River hand-in-hand, talking of everything and nothing. They spent very few nights together because of their respective marriages. Nebel often called her at home. The Noll's phone was in the hall, and when Helen heard it ring, she had to run to grab it before Chris did. Nebel muttered endearments into the phone, aware that Helen couldn't respond because Chris was near.

When Nebel wasn't with Jenny or Helen, he was out on photographic assignments. One night in 1948 he received a last-minute call from publicist Bill Doll, who was handling publicity for a Mike Todd show, *Something for the Boys*, starring Ethel Merman. It was Merman's birthday, and Doll wanted shots for the next day's papers. Nebel arrived at the theater at seventy-three in order to photograph Miss Merman before showtime. She arrived late, just in time to dress, have makeup applied, and go onstage. She apologized, and told Nebel he could catch the photo during intermission.

Nebel called Lillian to tell her he'd be a little late getting home. She was angry; she wasn't feeling well and wanted him with her.

Nebel had something to eat with Doll in Ruby Foo's, next door to the theater. They went backstage at intermission but couldn't get the photo then because the governor of Maryland and an entourage had come back to talk with Merman.

"Look, John," Doll said, "we're having a party in the Cub Room at Twenty-one after the show. Come on over there and get the shot."

Nebel agreed. Again he called Lillian. She was furious. They hung up in anger.

Nebel got the picture of Ethel Merman that night at 21. He also got some news that shook him down to his shoes. A friend, Joe Murphy, spotted Nebel leaving the restaurant and stopped him in the foyer.

"How's Lillian?" Murphy asked.

"Pretty good, Joe. She hasn't felt really great for a couple of weeks, but it's nothing serious."

"Well, maybe so, John. I know why she isn't feeling well."

"You do?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

"Because she's pregnant. She's afraid to tell you."

Nebel's reaction to the news took all the predictable turns: elation, fright, pride, and anxiety. These emotions all gave way, however, to depression. His marriage of sixteen years to Lillian had deteriorated into deepening unhappiness. Bringing a child into such a situation didn't make much sense. But, more important, the child represented another stumbling block in Nebel's quest for fame and fortune.

It isn't easy for most people to understand, much less condone, this latter reaction. Most men, after sixteen years of marriage, know who they are and what they'll be doing for the rest of their productive lives. Their ambition has been to find a good job, raise a family, and progress through the standard sequences of married life. This settled pattern does not always bring happiness, but it's accepted as part of society's master plan. And, when *they* think about it, it's a pretty good deal—house, kids, steady paycheck, two-week vacation, fireplace, dinner on the table, *security*.

There is a breed of man, however, to whom this kind of life represents failure. Nebel belongs to that breed. He was willing to work day and night to find that elusive plateau on which he believed he belonged. He didn't know what it was; he didn't know how to identify it or get there. But he figured if he stayed loose, met people, worked hard, learned quickly, and tried everything, he'd spot it off in the distance and find the right road. The potholes in this road to an undefined plateau are

enormous. Most men never encounter them because their traveling days are soon over. For Nebel, and others like him, the vehicle along the road is optimism. When it breaks down, it *really* breaks down. Steady-wins-the-race for the settled man. For Nebel, the race is run with daring acceleration until you hit the next hole in the road. You stop, repair your damaged 12-cylinder optimism, and take off again.

Lillian had become a pothole. The baby was a canyon, conceptually so wide that Nebel would never be able to cross it in search of his plateau.

His relationship with Helen continued. Jenny was past tense.* Lillian continued to suspect him, but she never dreamed that Helen had stolen her husband's heart.

Nebel's affair with Jenny had been conducted on a sexual level. There had also been an amused involvement on Nebel's part. He'd enjoyed sex with Jenny, although, by his own admission, he'd been reserved in his participation.

Nebel's stock continued to rise at Willoughby's. His innovative ideas impressed management. The good reports coming back from outside customers piled up on the president's desk. And on Saturdays, when Nebel worked inside the store, his success in selling push merchandise became the talk (spiced with large doses of envy) of all the other employees.

One Saturday morning as Nebel was setting up a display of PM, a fellow clerk came over and offered his congratulations. Another clerk followed on the first clerk's heels and said, "I guess your bullshit paid off, Nebel. Congratulations." Nebel asked why he was being congratulated. The first clerk suggested he go up and look at the main bulletin board.

Nebel didn't want to look at the board, especially when he saw eight or ten employees gathered around it. He waited until the crowd left. There it was, in the third paragraph: the president's announcement that John Nebel had been named store manager.

Nebel's job as manager of Willoughby's Thirty-second Street

* Jenny and Paul were eventually divorced. He married the woman he'd been seeing, and they live together to this day. Jenny drifted into a torrid affair with an industrialist who later became an important political figure. She is now married and the mother of two children.

store didn't last long. His appointment to the position was predictably unpopular with the other employees, and they did little to help him achieve his goals. They began circulating rumors that he was a Communist, a drunkard, and an anti-Semite. He was also accused of being prejudiced against the black cleaning help.

It all started to get to him—the tension at work, his deepening love for Helen, and the sad state of his marriage to Lillian, who was well along in her pregnancy. Nebel's depression took a sudden and serious turn downward. In desperation, he went to see the female doctor who was treating Lillian. After they had talked, she suggested that he see a friend of hers, another female doctor, who'd recently become a psychiatrist. Nebel spent seven sessions with the psychiatrist, just enough to pull him out of the worst of his depressed state and to allow him to think clearly, at least momentarily, about his situation and what the future held in store. He didn't change anything; he could, however, live with it better.

On January 3, 1949, a daughter, Jacqueline, was born to John and Lillian Nebel. She looked very much like her father. Her name was chosen by Nebel. He had wanted a boy to name Jack. Jacqueline was the closest he could come.

At first, Nebel displayed all the usual manifestations of a new father. He bathed the baby and changed her diapers. He was good at cootchy-coo talk in the middle of the night, and entertained her by playing a twenty-five-cent harmonica. He took hundreds of pictures of her, and proudly showed her off to friends when they visited. But beneath this veneer of happiness fermented a growing discontent. He wanted out. He wanted to be free to marry Helen Noll, assuming, of course, that she would divorce Chris. He begged her to leave him, promising to leave Lillian if she did. Helen refused. She wanted to leave Chris, but not for someone else. If she left, it would be for herself, and she had not yet reached that point.

The pressures Nebel was feeling at the time were viselike. He knew he'd have to leave Willoughby's. Where would he go? What would he do?

He became impossible to live with. The piano that occupied one wall of their small living room became the focal point of his

displeasure with Lillian. Like a military commander inspecting the recruits' barracks, he came home every night and inspected the piano keys. They were never clean enough, and Lillian heard about it. The baby, now crawling in her playpen, was a source of irritation. Nebel loved the child, but her crying pulsed in his head, and her very presence loomed larger and larger as an insurmountable hurdle in his quest for success. The harmonica was lost in the pile of photographic paraphernalia. Someone at work discovered Nebel reading the *Daily Worker*. "Communists read *that* paper, don't they," the clerk who discovered Nebel reading it asked someone in upper management, ignoring the fact that non-Communists read it, too, in the late forties.

Helen and Chris visited John and Lillian to see the baby. They brought gifts. Paul had sent flowers to Lillian when the the baby was born. Lillian had hated him for that, knowing his wife had had an affair with her husband.

The dissolution of the marriage between John and Lillian Nebel was a no-fault decision, a moral draw. Times had changed; they had changed. Goals differed, aspirations clashed. Helen Noll was a different kind of woman from Lillian. She better understood the frustrations Nebel was experiencing, defined success differently, had chased the goal of self-sufficiency, understood business aspirations. In 1949 she understood John Nebel better than Lillian did. It was time for substitutions if the Nebel game plan were to succeed.

Nebel moved into the Bryant Hotel. Helen left Chris and moved into another hotel. When she told Chris she was leaving him, he asked if it were for another man. Helen truthfully answered no. But she did tell Chris that she had been seeing John Nebel.

Helen and John continued living in separate hotels during the first year of their respective separations from their spouses. Nights were spent together, but they always went back "home." At times, Nebel told Helen he was going to return to Lillian. When he did (tell her, never actually return), they would not see each other for awhile. Helen occasionally dated a widower who knew of her relationship with Nebel. Whenever it was time for a reconciliation, the widower backed away.

Chris Noll was very broken up over Helen's departure. On

Mother's Day in 1950, he visited Lillian and demanded she do something to break up the John-Helen romance and force them to return to their legal mates. Lillian thought his demand was ridiculous. She was completely resigned to her separation from John, and for the first time in many years felt at peace with herself. The piano keys yellowed, Jackie crawled at will, and Lillian went about the job of starting over.

11

*“Let’s call it Long John’s.” **

“I didn’t know mom and dad were separated until I was eight,” says Jackie, John and Lillian’s only child, now married to Jim Lavetty, a successful restaurant manager. Lillian didn’t want to upset her young daughter, and elected to say her father was working in New Jersey and couldn’t get home often. Jackie believed this until a school chum, the daughter of one of Lillian’s friends, let the truth slip one day in school.

“Knowing really didn’t bother me too much,” says Jackie. “It didn’t change anything. Dad still visited two or three times a week. He always brought candy and toys, and we went to Palisades Amusement Park or Rye Beach in his car. Sometimes Mom came along, too. He used to take me horseback-riding in New Jersey. And for a while I took skating lessons at Rockefeller Center. Even after I learned, I had to have the instructor with me on the ice. Dad didn’t skate, and he was afraid to let me go out alone.

“I was always a little frightened of my father. Not that he

* Attorney Samuel List, when asked to suggest a name for Nebel’s first auction house in New Jersey

ever did anything to me to make me feel that way. He never hit me or yelled at me. But he was a very imposing figure. He was never an affectionate father. By that, I mean he wasn't one for hugging and kissing. And there were certain things he wanted me to do, and when I didn't, he made it very obvious he was displeased with me."

One of the things Nebel wanted his daughter to do was to learn to play the piano. It didn't interest her. But she did want to take dance lessons, an idea Nebel didn't like. He paid for the lessons reluctantly, but was in the audience applauding on the night of her first recital. He also gave Jackie a dozen long-stemmed, red roses and took her for ice cream after the performance.

Jackie's memories of her father during the initial years of his absence are positive ones. He was generous in his financial support of Lillian, and he visited them with regularity. He played Santa Claus on Christmas Eve, sneaking into the apartment after Jackie was asleep and leaving bags of toys. Lillian's mother, always a fan of her son-in-law, once told her daughter, "Be thankful for him. He's better to you now than when he was here. He's a good man."

Lillian speaks of him with fondness and love, although there are occasional asides indicating displeasure over aspects of their postmarital relationship. One thing she has never been able to forgive was an incident that she claims occurred between Helen Noll and Jackie.

Nebel never brought Helen with him when taking Jackie out for the day because Lillian forbade it. He broke the rule only once, inviting Helen to join them on a Saturday afternoon. Jackie was having her hair cut at Saks, and Helen met them there. After the haircut, they browsed through the store. Jackie fell in love with the store's revolving door, and kept going around and around in it until Helen, according to Jackie, scolded her.

Jackie was upset when she returned home that evening. She told her mother of Helen's scolding and this led Lillian to restate her demands to Nebel that Helen be excluded from any further father-daughter visits. Nebel agreed and never again asked Helen along, although he regrets it. "It really wasn't fair to Helen," he says in retrospect. "Or to Jackie. I should have

taken a stronger stand of my own." This situation eventually took center stage in Nebel's breakup with Helen in 1961.

"My father was always upset about my weight," Jackie says. "I tended to be chubby, and he wanted me thin. He was always on me about it, but never did anything to help. Every time he visited he had a bag of candy and pastry for me. Then he'd bug me about being fat."

"His constant harping about her weight made her upset, so she ate more," Lillian claims. "It was the same with her nail-biting. He hated it, and was always criticizing her for the habit."

"I decided one day to let my nails grow," says Jackie. "He noticed, and took one of my hands in his and told me how beautiful it was. Then he rushed me to a beauty parlor and got me a manicure. It was silly because even though I'd stopped biting my nails, they were still bitten down to the quick."

Today when Jackie Lavetty visits her father at the radio studio or at his apartment, he is likely to chide her for wearing her nails too long!

Nebel's marriage wasn't the only thing that was over. His managership at Willoughby's took a drastic, downward spiral, terminating in his resignation. He and Helen moved into a furnished studio apartment in Tudor City, where they were known as Mr. and Mrs. Nebel. Helen continued to guide the affairs of E. L. Jenkins while John, once again faced with a decision about himself, tried to figure out what to do next.

Joe Murphy, his friend who had told him of Lillian's pregnancy, solved that problem, at least for the moment. Murphy had always been fascinated by Nebel's ability to sell. He suggested they become partners and go on the road, working rural auction sales in Pennsylvania. The suggestion appealed to Nebel. They went up to the Bronx and bought a full-sized Dodge truck. A custom body was installed containing air mattresses, shelves, and a drop-leaf tailgate that Nebel would use as a stage. They stocked up on chenille bedspreads, ladies' stockings, shoelaces, and handkerchiefs, and headed for a sales location in Pennsylvania known as Yellow House. They arrived at four in the afternoon, just as most of the other trucks carrying farm produce pulled in. Nebel talked with a few local people, who told him the sales at Yellow House had been poor lately. Murphy and

Nebel decide to drive on to Nazareth, where Martin Guitars are made, and where another long-standing rural sales area was located. They arrived at five, paid the two-dollar fee to the manager, and started setting up the merchandise.

As Nebel watched Murphy arranging displays on the truck's tailgate, a suffocating wave of depression came over him. The glamor was gone. Working a tip was like putting up last year's Christmas ornaments. Some are broken, some lost, and the rest don't seem to sparkle as they did a year earlier. He had to fight back the tears. He looked down the row of trucks and spotted a familiar face, Harry the Comb. Harry made his living selling "unbreakable amberine combs," which he demonstrated by using them to saw through orange crates. Nebel walked down the row of trucks and was greeted by Harry.

"Hey, Duke, great to see you. What are you doing here? I heard you had a big job with cameras in New York. All the guys talk about the big success you made."

Nebel told Harry he'd packed it in because he was putting a chain of trucks on the road. He continued walking down the lineup of trucks, spotting a few other familiar faces, but realizing that most of them were unfamiliar. There were a couple of men Nebel had seen work before. One was an Italian fellow who dressed up in Indian war paint and feathers while his partner sold "Chief Hiawatha's botanical medicine." They were taking a nap on the ground by their car. One of them woke up, recognized Nebel, and poked his partner in the ribs. The partner opened his eyes, told Nebel he'd heard about his big score in New York with cameras, and closed his eyes again.

Nebel turned away, went back to the truck, climbed inside, and cried. Murphy shook him by the shoulders and told him to snap out of it. Nebel understood Joe's reaction. There he was, the sales *mavin*, the partner who would carry the Murphy-Nebel team to success, crying like a baby before their first night's work.

Nebel worked that night from the stage of the truck. The crowd was small; they grossed about a hundred dollars—a twenty-dollar profit. The evening was cut short when it began to rain at ten o'clock.

"That goddamn rain," Murphy said as they packed things away. "You were really rolling."

But Nebel knew the only rolling he was doing was downhill. For the first time in his life, he'd hated working before a tip. He felt demeaned, degraded, and defeated.

He and Joe left that night for Reading, and another sales location. The rain came down harder; visibility lowered below the safety level. Murphy pulled off the road and said they'd sleep there until the rain stopped.

Nebel took the bottom air-mattress bunk and closed his eyes. There was no air inside the truck. Murphy immediately fell asleep and began to snore. Nebel stood it for fifteen minutes. He woke Murphy and told him he suffered from claustrophobia. What he was really suffering from was fear. He insisted they drive on to Reading no matter what the weather. Nebel drove while Murphy slept in the back. They pulled into Reading early in the morning and checked into the Lincoln Hotel, where Nebel slept fitfully.

The sale in Reading was as disappointing as it had been in Nazareth, and it didn't improve as they bounced from location to location. Nebel insisted on doing most of the driving because he felt Murphy drove too fast. Murphy argued about it; he didn't like having someone drive the truck who was operating on so little sleep. They bickered, fought, and eventually fell into long silences as they traveled the roads of Pennsylvania.

It all ended on a clear Saturday morning two weeks into their trip. Murphy was driving, and driving fast. They had to arrive in Englishtown within a half hour to get space on the midway. Operating off the midway was bad; building a tip was too tough. Murphy came through an intersection just as another driver came through in a brand new car he was driving home from the showroom. They collided, turning over the truck and tearing the car almost in half. The driver of the car was unconscious and hanging out the door. Nebel was certain he was dead. The contents of the truck were strewn all over the street. Acid poured from the batteries used to power the truck's portable public address system. Fortunately, neither Nebel nor Murphy were more than bruised, and the driver of the car survived the injuries he had incurred.

They took a train back to New York, where they parted com-

pany. The insurance company paid off the loan on the truck as well as the damages filed by the car's driver.

"I visited Lil," Nebel recalls, "and went up on the roof of her building. I sat on the edge and said a little prayer that the wind would come and push me over."

The winds stayed calm, and Nebel was eventually offered a job as Eastern sales manager for the Anken Film Company, whose headquarters were in Newton, New Jersey. Nebel was told of the opening by a leading photochemical industry executive, Harold Dumont, who had met Nebel during his days at Willoughby's. Dumont, who was in sales for a supplier of photo materials to Willoughby, was faced with the same sales dilemma as Nebel had been—namely, how to appease big customers during the shortage. He was fascinated by Nebel's tale of how *he* dealt with large Willoughby customers, and was thoroughly amused by Nebel's stories of street-selling. Dumont recommended Nebel to Anken, and they quickly hired him.

The Anken job paid \$175 a week. Nebel needed the money to support Lillian and Jackie and to contribute to his living expenses with Helen.

The job turned out to be, however, no more than a fateful interlude during which Nebel met John Conway, a Pace College graduate who had recently been hired by Anken as a book-keeper. Conway was a personable young man, ten years Nebel's junior, who was filled with ambition. Nebel regaled him with his stories, and Conway began questioning him about how a young man might go about getting started in business for himself. Nebel, pleased with Conway's attention and respect, spent many hours telling of the scores to be made "out there."

The opportunity for Conway to take a fling on his own came quickly. Conway and his boss at Anken didn't see eye-to-eye, and Conway resigned. He made a date to deliver the books on which he'd been working to corporate headquarters in New Jersey, and Nebel, who had a meeting scheduled there, offered to drive him.

As they drove along Route 46, which was then almost void of roadside businesses, Nebel spotted a small, rundown fruitstand, in front of which was tacked a hand-lettered sign ad-

vertising all the cider you could drink for a nickel. John Nebel has always loved cider, so he and Conway pulled in front of the stand and went inside. A single, 30-watt light bulb illuminated the room. Two men sat at the far end, each in front of his own potbellied stove. The November air outside was in the low thirties; inside, it nudged forty.

Nebel bought a gallon of cider. As he was leaving, he asked the owners whether there were other places like theirs "for rent on Route 46.

"This here place is for rent," one of the men said.

"How much?" Nebel asked.

"Two-fifty a month."

"That's ridiculous. It's worth twenty-five bucks."

The owners suddenly seemed to warm up. The way Nebel had it figured, they were dying in the place and were desperate to get out. He knew they'd come way down on the rent. Of course, he was only asking. What would he want a fruitstand for anyway?

"Why would you want to rent that place?" Conway asked as they drove.

"No reason. I'm just interested in seeing what other guys are doing."

At Newton, Conway turned over the books while Nebel drank cider and played rummy with his boss. They left an hour later and drove back on Route 46.

Suddenly, Nebel swerved the car across the road and came to a screeching halt in front of the same fruitstand they had visited earlier. When he and Conway entered, the owners jumped up from their stools and greeted them. After some bantering back and forth, Nebel extracted from them a better rent deal. They'd let him have the place for \$75 a month through June of the following year. He'd pay \$100 from June through September, and \$125 after that.

"I'll call you," Nebel told them.

Nebel's conversation on the way home was filled with phrases like, "Naturally, John, I have no interest in this sort of thing anymore, but if a fellow were to take that place and turn it in to an auction house, he could make a bundle of money."

Conway listened. The more Nebel talked, the more Conway

was convinced that the idea of an auction house on Route 46 was ingenious.

"Why don't we do it?" Conway finally asked as they were going through the Holland Tunnel.

"Do what? The auction house? No, I'm through with that kind of life. Besides, it would take a lot of dough to get started, and with my obligations, I couldn't swing it right now."

"I have money," Conway said.

"How much?"

"About a thousand."

"Not enough."

"I can borrow some more," Conway said enthusiastically.

"We'll see."

Helen Noll thought the idea was wonderful. She offered to put up some money to get the auction house started, and promised to work there on weekends.

The deal was made, and Nebel took over the fruitstand the end of November. Conway spent days building shelves and sprucing up the shack's interior. Nebel took a few days off from Anken and went to Grand Street, on the Lower East Side of New York, where he bought the merchandise that would be sold in the auction house. He also arranged to rent folding chairs from a local undertaker. Helen scouted around Parsippany one Saturday and collected every empty carton she could find. This was Nebel's idea; by having piles of cartons visible, people would think they were buying from a big-time outfit.

There was still the question of structuring the business. To do this, Nebel went to see Sammy List, the attorney. List suggested forming a New Jersey corporation. He asked what name the corporation would carry. Nebel looked at Conway and Helen, and shrugged. A few suggestions were offered, none of which appealed to anyone.

"What's the place going to be called?" List asked.

"John Nebel's, I guess," Helen answered.

"No, that's no good," replied List. He thought for a moment. "Look, John, you're tall and thin. How about calling it Long John's Auction House? It's catchy, folksy—should attract attention."

Nebel didn't like the name, but accepted it as a means of

ending the debate. The corporation was formed—Long John's, Incorporated—and a sign was professionally painted to put in front of the fruitstand.

On December 10, 1948, Long John Nebel made his first public appearance. To do so, he'd had to turn down a two-hundred-dollar photographic assignment on Mae West, offered by *Photoplay*. At the end of the opening Saturday night, Long John's Auction House had grossed sixteen dollars.

Nebel was very depressed. Conway remained jubilant; just being there while the master, Nebel, worked his verbal magic on the dozen or so customers, filled him with a sense of participating in a unique and promising event in American business. Helen, not one to swing emotionally in any direction, shrugged it off and went about her own business.

The next weekend, business picked up. The word was getting around the area that bargains could be had on the highway. Things looked good until Nebel received a phone call from the publisher of the local newspaper, the *Citizen*, asking questions about his business. At first, Nebel was pleased. It sounded like a good publicity break until the publisher said a town meeting had been scheduled in three weeks to discuss a new ordinance requiring the licensing of all places of auction. The proposed licensing fee was five thousand dollars per year, plus fifty dollars for the auctioneer and ten dollars for each employee. It was all too obvious. The town didn't want Long John's Auction House. The other merchants didn't want him either; discount merchandise was bad for their business.

"By this time, John was an emotional yo-yo," Helen says. "He was up and down every day. The call from the newspaper really laid him low."

"I just wanted to say the hell with it," Nebel says about the auction house, "but Helen got mad at me." She persuaded him to make a fight for it. He agreed, but wearily.

During the next few weekends, Nebel, Conway, and Helen made sure that every customer at the auction house knew about the pending town meeting. They also made sure the customers got better deals than usual—they needed allies.

Nebel and his crew arrived early at the town hall the night of the meeting and took seats in the back. The room filled

up. Nebel's customers recognized him and waved hello. No one else knew who he was.

The town board, led by the mayor, opened the meeting and took care of some incidental business. Then, the town attorney read the proposed ordinance covering auction businesses. When he was finished, he asked the assembled citizens for comments. Nebel stood up.

"Your name, please," the town attorney asked.

"John Nebel. May I come forward?"

"No, that isn't necessary, Mr. Nebel. You may make your comment from where you are."

"Sir," Nebel said, "I would sincerely appreciate being allowed to come to the front. I am *Long John Nebel*. I am a performer, a professional performer, and I never work from the back of a house, especially a packed house like this. This is possibly my last night in this town, and I think you should allow me this courtesy."

The attorney looked to the mayor for guidance. There were shrugs all along the board. Nebel left his seat and walked to the front of the room, stopping to shake hands with some of his regular customers. He shook hands with the mayor and attorney when he reached their table, and turned so that he was half-facing the board, half-facing the audience. He began to speak slowly, deliberately.

"I happen to have with me a postcard that was sent by a friend of mine in Philadelphia [Nebel reached into his pocket and pulled out a postcard he bought the day before], and I was interested that in one corner of the postcard, the city fathers of Philadelphia saw fit to remind us that Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. Now, I found this interesting because I know that the name of one of the good merchants in this town is Philadelphia [he'd checked; he was right] and I'm sure Mr. Philadelphia has as much brotherly love in his heart as any city. But there doesn't seem to be much brotherly love here tonight. I'm not from here, and maybe that's part of the problem—I'm from New York. I don't wish to harm anyone. I looked at maps of New York and New Jersey and I don't see any walls drawn on them, walls to keep one man from earning a living along with other men. . . . I must admit that I think this proposed

ordinance is very unfair. It is designed to tax someone like me out of business. I had originally intended to bring my attorney to this meeting, but I decided that we are just plain people here—people talking to people—me—and you. By stating my own case, I may have a fool for an attorney, as the saying goes, but I'm glad I came here myself, because I wanted to talk to you, not an attorney, as much as I respect the legal profession [with a nod to the town attorney]. I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that I have made up my mind not to close up my business on Route Forty-six. You may force me to, but not without a fight from me—I would like to ask the town attorney here for some legal advice—sir, you can bill me for whatever this advice is worth [snickers from the audience]. Let me ask you this, counselor: Supposing I was holding *action* sales, but not auction sales? Suppose my *action* sales did not involve competitive bidding? Supposing I conduct my business just like every other merchant in town here? I have seats—people come in and sit down. I chat with them—'Hi, there, how's the family?' I ask them. . . . Now, ladies and gentlemen, I happen to be a talker. I love to talk. And I like people. Supposing, counselor, I tell those good folks who have entered my store that I have for sale fifty gallons of white paint, and that I'm going to sell those fifty gallons for a very low price to everyone who wishes to buy a gallon or two. And I have shoe laces—black, mercerized shoe laces with beaded tips, shoe laces guaranteed to outlast your shoes. And what I'm doing is romancing those shoe laces and that paint by talking—just like every other merchant—just like Mr. Philadelphia. Counselor, I don't believe there is any law on the books anywhere that would keep me from doing business like this, is there? [The town attorney shook his head.] Well, that's what I'm going to do, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Mayor, gentlemen of the board—I'm going right back to that little place of mine on Route 46 and take a big paintbrush and dip it in some of that paint I have for sale at bargain prices and cross out the U in the word auction on my sign. It will become *action*, not *auction*—Long John's *Action* Sale. That sign cost me two hundred dollars, but I don't care. I'm willing to mess it up just to stay in business here. And I want to show each and every one of you how my action sales will work—I want you to see with your very own eyes that my

business is built on honesty and quality merchandise at bargain prices."

Nebel looked to the back of the room at Conway. "Johnnie, please bring up the razor blades [the town attorney started to protest but the crowd began laughing]. . . . Thank you, Johnnie—this is one of my assistants, by the way, John Conway, a college graduate with wide experience in business. . . . Now ladies and gentlemen, I have here the most unique razor blade ever developed. It is the Lloyd Blade, made of Swedish chrome steel, triple hair-tested under Cooper Huet Lights. This blade is not blue—many of you use blue blades, but I want to show you something [Nebel took a lemon from his pocket]. Watch closely, ladies and gentlemen, as I slice up this lemon with this other blue blade. Notice that after only a few slices, the blue is gone from the blade. Notice, too, that the cutting edge of this so-called blue blade is not blue—the blue is only for effect. My blades are not blue. They are not pink, yellow, gold, orange, or red—they are genuine Swedish chrome steel. And I am going to offer them to you on a money-back guarantee if they are not the very best razor blades you have ever used. This blade will give you a smoother, finer, quicker shave with one downstroke than any blade on the market, and I will give you your money back if you don't agree. Now these blades are twenty-five cents a pack—each package contains five blades. There are twenty packs of blades in this carton—that's worth five dollars. I will be very honest with you and admit you can buy a carton of a hundred blades in some stores for three ninety-five. Some stores may even run a special and sell a carton for two ninety-five—they do this as a loss-leader. Now I always make a profit; I am an expert in merchandise buying and selling. And I am going to give you people an opportunity tonight. I want you to use five of these blades. If they are not what I say they are, bring them back to Long John's *Action House* on Route Forty-six for your money back. I am not going to ask you for three dollars for a carton of one hundred blades. I will not ask you for two dollars. I am going to sell these cartons of one hundred blades for just one dollar—that's right, one single penny for each blade. Now I have outside in my car one hundred cartons—that's all—just one hundred. One hundred of you will be able to take advantage

of this special sale. And I must limit you to only one carton per customer—that's one of the rules of my business; I never want to see a few people prosper while others are left out in the cold."

By this time, everyone was laughing heartily, including the mayor and most of the town board members. Nebel went on. ". . . I am doing this to make every one of you a walking, talking advertisement for Long John's Action House. And, ladies and gentlemen, before I step down, I have one other item to offer you. . . . I am doing this to demonstrate how my business is run. I have in the back a vacuum cleaner. [Conway brought it to Nebel.] All of you know that there have been many technical advances in the manufacturing of vacuum cleaners. However, I have the privilege to deal with the R and B Vacuum Cleaner Company—R and B specializes in rebuilding vacuum cleaners. They strip them, take them apart, replace old belts with special heavy-duty belts. The bags are refinished in a better grade of fabric. In short, these vacuum cleaners are better when they leave R and B than when they were brand new. . . . Now, if I were conducting an auction, I would get a very large price for this one vacuum cleaner from R and B. But I am not running an auction—I am running an action sale. If I were to offer this vacuum for forty dollars, I know I would have five or six hands in the air asking to be the one to buy it. . . . I am not asking fifty dollars. . . . I am asking not what this vacuum lists for—one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I am asking only twenty dollars—And I have only one—" Nebel turned to the town attorney and locked him in his stare.

Helen Noll says: "When the town attorney fished in his pocket and paid John twenty dollars for that vacuum, I thought I'd fall off the chair."

The town leaders left Nebel alone after that night. The sign stayed the same—Long John's Auction House, and the customers flocked in. Nebel had the old magic back. Helen spent every Friday and Saturday night running up and down the aisles, her arms laden with razor blades, shoe laces, pillows, and other goods sold to the tip. Conway worked along with her, delivering merchandise to buyers, keeping the fires going in the potbellied

stoves, shoving money into garbage pails on the stage. He taught Helen how to keep double-entry books, and worked with her on the business side of the venture.

Nebel eventually quit his job with Anken and devoted his full time to buying and selling merchandise for his auction house. He soon moved across Route 46 to a larger, newer building, which is now Grant Furniture. Later he moved again to an even larger building, now occupied by Hoffman Carpets. Business was good and looked like it would get even better.

His relationship with Helen was good, too. Their life was insular, aside from outside business activities. They seldom went out, preferring to eat at home and occasionally to entertain friends. Nebel was the cook when company came for dinner. He enjoyed whipping up Chinese dishes in an electric frying pan he'd bought. During his cooking escapades, Helen functioned as his "hand-it-to-me" assistant.

Lillian never called the apartment. She stayed out of her husband's new life, something Helen found admirable. Helen has always respected Lillian and feels some guilt about having been the one to capture Nebel's love when Lillian lost it. These guilt feelings are minimal, however, because she and Nebel came together on her terms. She didn't divorce Chris for Nebel, and she never promised Nebel anything should he leave Lillian. She went her own way, and the fact that Nebel fell in with her was a matter of timing and circumstance, not predisposition. People don't break up marriages. People are there when marriages break up.

Much of Helen and John's time together was spent walking. "He was the greatest walker I've ever known," she says. "He'd walk all over the city, down to Greenwich Village, up to the eighties. I stopped going with him because he wouldn't stop walking and sit down."

Jackie recalls: "We use to take long walks. I was very little then, and my father would be five steps ahead of me. He'd look back and say, 'Are you catching up, honey?' and I'd say 'Yes, daddy' and we'd keep right on going."

Nebel has never been much of a drinker. He often criticized Helen for drinking and for smoking, although he smoked himself. He enjoyed making breakfast in bed for her on the week-

ends, something she never enjoyed. "I like to get up, wash my face, brush my teeth, fix my hair, and *then* eat breakfast. But he insisted. I couldn't convince him."

Helen's family liked Nebel. He was never introduced to her mother and father, but her brother and sister enjoyed being with him.

On a Saturday night in the summer of 1954, Nebel was on-stage at his auction house selling merchandise to a full house. It was late—after midnight—and the sale was rolling along. New customers filtered in even at that hour: night workers, truckers, cops, insomniacs. One man that night who spotted the sign on the highway and turned into the parking lot was destined to play one of the most important roles in Long John Nebel's life. His name was Robert Monroe, and he was vice-president of the Mutual Radio Network, which included WOR in New York City.

The sale ended at four in the morning. As the customers filed out, Monroe came up and introduced himself to Nebel, who at that moment was somewhat distracted by the business of closing up for the night. John Conway was transferring money from the garbage pails on the stage to canvas bags, and Nebel was helping Helen clear the platform of merchandise. Monroe didn't mention his position with Mutual, and Nebel was not particularly interested in what he had to say. He'd been approached many times by people in the audience who owned automobile dealerships or insurance agencies and who suggested he go to work for them as a salesman. When Monroe told him he ought to consider trying radio, Nebel accepted it as just another piece of meaningless conversation. Monroe gave Nebel his card, and asked him to call when he was in New York. Nebel said he would.

Monroe returned two weeks later and talked to Nebel again. "Please call me," he asked.

Nebel did contact Bob Monroe a few weeks later, and visited with him at his production company on Sixty-second Street. They had lunch a few times, during which Monroe continued to encourage Nebel to take a fling at radio. Naturally, Nebel was intrigued with the idea, but down deep he felt it would end up as just that—a fling. He knew nothing about broadcasting, and was frightened of it. His eighth-grade education loomed up as

an insurmountable barrier to talking on radio. Nebel thought that people on radio had perfect diction, pronunciation, and a limitless knowledge of grammar. The auction house was going nicely; he felt at home there. And what of Conway? He was no salesman. Without Nebel, there could be no auction house.

Still, he remained intrigued with the idea of trying radio. If he succeeded—and he was certain he wouldn't—it would bring the fame he had yearned for since childhood.

When he discussed it with Helen, she responded perfectly by being noncommittal.

It took Nebel almost two years to decide to try radio. He went on the air in February 1956, not as Long John Nebel, but as John of the "Charlie and John Show." It was an inauspicious debut. The show was terrible; Nebel was worse. But it served one important function. It gave John Nebel a taste of broadcasting, a taste he found he liked. And it launched him on one of the most impressive careers in radio history.

PART THREE

12

*“A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes it.” **

The show that introduced John Nebel to radio listeners was originally intended to be a solo performance. But he candidly admitted his fears of the medium to Bob Monroe, who responded by teaming him with a twenty-year radio veteran, Charlie Holmes. Holmes was very at home before the microphone, which was what Nebel needed. He knew he could use his ability as a fast study to pick up the necessary broadcasting techniques from a seasoned pro.

The “Charlie and John Show” was scheduled from 4:30 to 5:00 P.M. on the Mutual Network, which meant that 630 radio stations had the option to carry it, or to ignore it. WOR, the network’s flagship station in New York, chose to ignore it. So did most of the other stations. Nebel didn’t realize the stations had this option, and was disappointed to learn that a grand total of 23 of them carried the show, all serving small, rural areas. The first fan letter came from an old lady in Iowa. So did the second letter—which was also the last.

Charlie Holmes did most of the talking on the show. He also

* Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Act V, Scene 2

directed it, giving the engineer the necessary cues for music, commercials, and special effects. Nebel was fascinated with the way cues were given. When Charlie wanted the theme song "On the Sunny Side of the Street," to be faded under his opening welcome, he raised his flattened hand above his head and slowly brought it down. Nebel was careful to note the precise spot in the song at which Charlie signaled a fade; he always did it after sixteen bars of music had been played.

Charlie didn't show up one afternoon during the second week, leaving Nebel on his own for the first time. He was nervous. At four-thirty, he looked through the glass at the engineer and gave the signal to start the theme. *Sixteen bars*. He was ready to count. By the time four bars had been played, he realized that the engineer had cued up the wrong theme. It wasn't "Sunny Side"; it was some other song. Nebel panicked. He lost count of the measures and sat immobilized, his eyes pleading through the glass for guidance. All he got was a bored look from the engineer, who let the song play through to the end. There were five seconds of dead air when the song finished, which seemed to Nebel five minutes. He finally began talking, filling the first ten minutes of the show with explanations about why Charlie wasn't there. Charlie eventually arrived, and ended the show in his usual manner.

The "Charlie and John Show" lasted thirteen weeks, its original contract run. Nebel continued selling at the auction house on weekends. He was certain some of the customers would come up and tell him how much they enjoyed him on radio. That never happened because he wasn't being broadcast in the New York area.

When the thirteen weeks were up and Monroe informed Nebel that the network had decided not to renew the show, he was relieved. He didn't like being second banana to Charlie Holmes. Holmes was a nice guy, but he found the situation uncomfortable.

After a month, Nebel discovered himself dwelling on the thought of doing another radio show. He called Bob Monroe and proposed an interview show, to be taped in his own apartment. He'd begun listening to Barry Gray, whom he still considers the best interviewer on radio, and liked the idea of talking

with interesting people. He told Monroe he was willing to do the new show for the same money he'd received for the "Charlie and John Show"—union scale.

"And I'll buy my own tape equipment," Nebel added.

"John, I'll be honest with you," Monroe said. "I'm still convinced you can do a good radio show. But you don't know the intricacies of it, the timing, the pace. If I buy this interview-show idea, I want to pair you with Charlie again. He's a good interviewer, and you can learn a lot from him."

Nebel reluctantly agreed. He went out and bought a new BerLant tape recorder, expensive broadcast-quality microphones, a mixer panel, and other equipment necessary to tape shows in his sixth-floor Tudor City apartment. It was set up in his apartment by two WOR engineers, Barney Beck and Al Schaffer, who did the job as a favor. For their help, Nebel bought each of them a Nikon camera.

"When John set everything up, you couldn't even turn around in the place," Helen Noll says. "It was the smallest apartment in the building."

The new "Charlie and John Show" hit the air on WOR. The network did not carry it. At Nebel's urging, he and Charlie introduced themselves as John Nebel and Charlie Holmes, the use of last names giving the show some dignity in his mind. Helen functioned as a tape monitor while Charlie and John interviewed the guests. There were a few technical problems; the girl in the next apartment never failed to use her bathroom during taping time, and the flush became a roar on the tape. Nebel bought the biggest blanket he could find and draped it over the area where he, Charlie, and the guest talked. Some guests didn't like being interviewed in a wool tent, but none refused.

The split between Charlie and John occurred during the third week of taping. The guest who precipitated the rift was a leading Associated Press photographer. Toward the end of the half-hour taped show, Nebel slipped the photographer a note asking if he would stay and tape another half-hour program. The photographer nodded affirmatively. As the show was being wrapped up, Nebel told the listeners that the next day's show would be a continuation of the interview with the photographer.

During the break between tapings, Charlie asked Nebel to accompany him into the bathroom. He told Nebel that doing an interview with the same person two days in a row was bad radio, and suggested they go out and tell the photographer to go home. Nebel balked. A heated argument started, during which Nebel told Charlie he didn't need him any more. One word led to another and Holmes stormed out of the apartment.

Nebel did the second interview with the photographer; he also did a third. He never bothered to tell Bob Monroe of the format change, and so it was three days before Monroe found out he was doing the show by himself. When he asked Nebel about it, he received an honest answer. "The show is better with just me," Nebel said.

As John Nebel was getting his feet wet in radio, WOR's management was undergoing changes. Robert Leder was brought in as vice-president and general manager. He joined forces with the station's sales manager, William McCormick, and Robert Smith, vice-president in charge of programming, to seek new approaches. Two of the shows being discussed in the executive suite were the Nebel interview show, which was being broadcast nightly from eleven-thirty to midnight, and the all-night show conducted by Jean Shepherd. Shepherd, one of the most gifted storytellers of our day, was not pleasing the new management. Leder wanted music from midnight until five, and sent memos to Shepherd, instructing him to play more music and to talk less. Shepherd is reported to have replied, "I can talk better than any record ever made." He ignored management's memos and continued to weave stories of his childhood to his growing, fanatically loyal corps of listeners.

Nebel was aware of the management changes and was anxious to receive feedback about his show from his new bosses. He called Leder's office a number of times, but the calls were not returned. Nebel felt ignored, which led him to feel threatened.

One night in early May 1956, while doing the show live from WOR's studios at 1440 Broadway (he had abandoned the primitive facilities of his apartment when he began using theme music and recorded commercials), Nebel told his listeners that changes were afoot at WOR. He said if they wished to see him continue

on the air, they should send letters, postcards, and telegrams to Mr. Robert Leder.

The next morning, the phone rang in Nebel's apartment. It was one of the station's producers.

"What the hell did you say last night?" he asked.

Nebel told him.

The producer said Leder had received fifteen telegrams from listeners demanding that Nebel be kept on the air. He told Nebel it was a stupid thing for him to have done and suggested he think twice in the future about pulling such stunts.

Nebel considered calling Leder, but thought better of it. The next morning, Leder's office called him. He was wanted there immediately.

When Nebel arrived at the WOR offices for his meeting, he was approached in the halls by people who knew of the pitch he'd made to his listeners. Mail was coming in; Leder had received over one hundred and fifty letters. To Nebel, this was a positive news. No one would fire anyone with that kind of listener backing.

Leder's secretary ushered him into the office. He stood in front of the desk as Leder, not even acknowledging his presence, signed a stack of letters. When Leder finally did look up, he said, "You're Long John?" (Nebel had just started using that name on the air, thinking it would help promote his auction business.)

Leder got up from his chair and paced the office, talking about the bad taste Nebel had exhibited on the air. Nebel listened for a while. Finally he said, "I don't mind if you wear a hole in that Bigelow, Mr. Leder, but do you mind if I sit down?"

Leder smiled for the first time. He told Nebel he considered him a good future radio talent. He especially complimented him on his ability to do an effective commercial. "But I'm going to have to take you off the air, John. I'm implementing a new program series called "Music from Studio X," which will cut into your time period. But I meant it when I said you were good. Maybe we can have you back some day."

Nebel left Leder's office disappointed, but with a respect for the new general manager. Leder had at least talked to him, and

his compliments took the edge off the fact he had fired him. The income from the auction house also softened the blow.

Nebel occasionally stopped in at 1440 Broadway to talk with the friends he'd made at the station. One morning in early August he bumped into Bob Smith, the programming chief. Smith took him aside and asked whether he'd be interested in doing the all-night show, now being hosted by Jean Shepherd.

Nebel was surprised. He'd become a Shepherd fan, and couldn't imagine the station letting him go. He was aware that management's complaint about the lack of music on the show had only prompted Shepherd to talk more, but he couldn't believe he would be considered as a replacement for someone of Shepherd's caliber. He told Smith he was interested, but suggested that Shepherd be given sufficient notice of his imminent firing to enable him to look for something else. Smith sidestepped a reply to the suggestion, shook Nebel's hand, and told him they'd be in touch.

It happened the night of August 16. Leder was driving home at two in the morning. He had Shepherd's program on his car radio, and every mile he drove was another mile of anger. There were no records being played, just Jean Shepherd talking about Gary, Indiana, automobile trips with his family, and dish night at the local movie house. Leder called the station from home, told Shepherd to get off the air, and instructed the engineer to play music until a replacement showed up. Leder then called a staff announcer at WOR-TV and told him to get over to the radio station and finish the night for Shepherd.

Nebel was hired the next day.

Long John Nebel's entry into New York's all-night radio market was without fanfare. He didn't have much of a planned format. He played records during the initial weeks to fill time and appease management, and between the music he interspersed stories and an occasional interview.

Radio in the mid-fifties, at the time of Nebel's introduction to it, was undergoing painful changes in format and philosophy. The forties had been stable, prosperous years for the audio medium, and the biggest stars in the entertainment world performed nightly on network radio. Its impact and influence on the public were recognized; government surveillance increased

dramatically, as did the number of broadcasting stations. The radio networks were engaged in spirited and lucrative competition. Some of the favorite radio entertainers of that decade were Jack Benny (for Jell-O), Bob Hope, Garry Moore, Jimmy Durante, and Red Skelton; also popular were shows such as "Fibber McGee and Molly," "Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy," "Henry Aldrich," "Arthur Godfrey Time," "Your Hit Parade," "Ed Sullivan Entertains," "Duffy's Tavern," "Blondie and Dagwood," Jimmy Fidler's "What's New on the Hollywood Scene?" "Grand Ole Opry," "Mr. and Mrs. North," "Abbott and Costello," "Here's Morgan" with Henry Morgan, "Sherlock Holmes," "Suspense," the "Burl Ives Show," "You Bet Your Life" starring Groucho Marx, the "Billie Burke Show," the "Harry James Show," "My Friend Irma," "Queen for a Day," "Beulah," "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts," "America's Town Meeting of the Air," "Meet the Press," "Martin Kane, Private Eye," "First Nighter," "Family Theatre," "Life with Luigi," "Our Miss Brocks," "Inner Sanctum," "Alka Seltzer Time," "Let's Pretend," "The Quiz Kids," and "Lum and Abner."

But along came the fifties and that monster medium—television. Network radio's huge evening audiences flocked to the new electronic marvel. TV's impact, considered so strong that Hollywood predicted the end of filmmaking, forced radio to reconsider its approach to keeping listeners. It became evident that although television had stolen away the prime evening audiences, it could not do the same at other hours of the day. The housewife did not have time to sit down and watch a program, but she could listen to one. People in automobiles could not divert their attention to a TV screen, but they, too, could listen, and would listen, *if radio* offered them something different. Too, radio was mobile. Its smaller equipment could be taken where the huge TV cameras could not.

Radio, as we know it today, evolved during TV's golden years in the fifties. The networks dropped drama and comedy in favor of music and news. Disc jockeys became national names, spinning commercials and comments in between records, and establishing highly individualized styles of delivery. This change to music and news resulted in the loss of influence by the radio networks. Local stations found it was much less expensive to

use their own disc jockeys to play records than it was to use similar programs provided by the networks. As local station influence increased, the networks fell back on world news and special events.

During NBC's search for different approaches to network programming it developed the weekend service, "Monitor," a loosely connected series of interviews, comment, and music. A new breed of radio newsman was spawned, one who left the studio with portable microphones and recorders, and went where the news was being made. Drivers in their cars began to hear traffic reports.

The "Long John Nebel Show" couldn't have been introduced at a better time. Those long, lonely hours from midnight until dawn had to be filled. Most stations filled them with music. WOR filled them with talk—the Nebel variety. It was something listeners weren't getting elsewhere, especially after Nebel began to define, in his own mind, what the show was and what it would become.

Two concepts began to dominate the show's format—one conceived and nurtured by Nebel, the other occurring naturally and without any preplanning.

The first concept was that a majority of the shows would be devoted to discussing strange and unexplained phenomena. Nebel realized that outer space was a hot topic. UFO's (Unidentified Flying Objects) were being reported in the press almost daily. Book publishers were issuing titles dealing with extrasensory perception (ESP), witchcraft, parapsychology, voodoo, spiritualism, and the occult. He decided that he would become the ringmaster of the strange, and his program the radio pulpit where those with unusual tales could expound their views for the benefit of what he hoped would become a growing listening audience. He couldn't have been more right, because within months he was the talk of New York radio.

The other development in the show's format was the panelist concept. This involved having a corps of regulars on the show as co-hosts. Nebel has never wavered from this format in all his years of broadcasting, even though his use of panelists has caused periodic problems with station management. His panelist crew is made up of friends who play a large part in his daily

life. Some pull large amounts of fan mail, and have become minor celebrities. There is no pay for a Nebel panelist. He does the show because it's fun, informative, provides friendship with the famous, and injects a touch of public recognition into otherwise mundane lives. In some cases, a panelist's business is helped through his or her association with the show, although seldom to the extent believed by some of the other panelists who do not benefit in this manner.

The Nebel forum-for-the-strange was an instant success. There was nothing else like it on radio. Ben Gross, the acknowledged dean of radio-TV editors, who retired recently from the New York *Daily News*, was the first New York newspaperman to latch on to the Nebel style of broadcasting. Gross likened the show to an eighteenth-century coffee house, where people sat around and exchanged ideas. He began writing about this new voice on the air, who "did commercials like a sidewalk peddler selling potato peelers." Gross felt that people were tired of hearing great national issues discussed. Nebel's subject matter—outer space, witchcraft, ESP—gave listeners an escape to another world, where problems were whimsical.

"Nebel wasn't afraid to talk," Gross says. "Most radio people were afraid to talk. His use of panelists created familiar voices for listeners, people with whom they could identify." The panel certainly did contribute to the show's success. Panelists were not broadcasting pros; they came from all walks of life, just as did the listeners.

Gross's frequent mentions of Nebel in his column prompted other radio writers to listen and comment. This flurry of publicity, which led to bigger audiences, tempered WOR's management concern over the direction the show was taking. Leder considered Nebel a freak, but Nebel's ratings, coupled with increased sponsor participation, bought him security at WOR. However, the auction house in Parsippany suffered without him on the platform. Nebel quietly folded the corporation in 1956, much to John Conway's chagrin, and there has been virtually no contact between the two men since its demise. Helen Noll was more aware of Conway's disappointment than was Nebel.

"I suppose it would have been a noble thing for me to stick with the auction house and not leave it for a fling at radio," muses

Nebel. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone, especially Conway, who was a fine guy. But I just couldn't turn down a chance to pursue a career that would give me the kind of public success I craved. As it worked out, I made the right decision. I understand John Conway is a very successful businessman these days. He was always bright as hell, and I had a lot of admiration for him. It obviously worked out better for both of us in the long run."

The cast of characters using the Nebel show as a forum for their outlandish claims became the subject of cocktail chatter around town. It would be impossible to chronicle all of them, but a few bear special mention.

Kuda Bux came on the show a number of times, and while heavily blindfolded, read passages from books handed him by Nebel and the panel.

Bob Ewing claimed to be an ambassador from Venus. "I don't buy his story," Nebel told his listeners, "but he sure talks great, doesn't he?"

Mark Probert claimed to be a medium through whom the spirit entity "Yada" spoke. Hours on the show were spent observing Probert going into a deep trance and communicating with Yada.

Andy Sinatra, a barber from Brooklyn, claimed to be in touch with creatures from outer space via telepathic communications transmitted by headbands of his own design. The headbands, according to Sinatra, were tuned to different frequencies. One, about two inches wide and sporting twin, bouncy antennas, was tuned to the Venusian sending frequency. Sinatra was a frequent visitor on the show, and was called, by Nebel, "The Mystical Tonsorial Artist from Brooklyn." He often claimed to be bombarded with extraterrestrial messages, and in the interest of his mental health, devised a special headband to block out these messages.

Gist Talmist was the inventor of the psygistograph, a weird device constructed of an umbrella's guts, string, wires, and tubes. After five hours on the air, Nebel and his panel agreed that none of them had the slightest idea what the invention was supposed to accomplish.

Dr. Wallace Minto, a physicist and chemist, invented a machine to "read" auras. The aura theory is that every living thing

generates a personal and distinct aura around itself. This aura is composed of halolike shades of color, and if read correctly, can help in the diagnosis of illnesses and in revealing emotions and personal characteristics. Dr. Minto brought the machine to the show but, alas, the equipment in the control room rendered it useless. Lights popped and gauges fluttered, but no auras were read that night. Minto also appeared on the show in various other capacities, generally when another guest was of the scientific community.

Reverend V. L. Cameron, inventor of another aura meter, also offered aura goggles through which he claimed almost everyone could actually see auras. Nebel tried them and ascertained he simply wasn't intelligent enough to benefit from the goggles.

Thomas G. Hieronymous invented the Hieronymous Machine which, according to its namesake, analyzed the eloptic radiation in minerals.

Orfeo Angelucci, an author, claimed to have met a young man named Adam who gave him a drink of magic potion. A five-inch tall blonde appeared in a glass on the table and did a wild, sensuous dance before falling exhausted to her tiny knees and fading from view. Adam then told Orfeo that he was once enticed onto a spaceship by a beautiful lady who took him through the interplanetary system at speeds of ten million miles an hour. Nebel and Orfeo became friendly; Orfeo told a good story.

George Adamski bumped into a little fellow from Venus on the Arizona desert. Subsequently he traveled extensively to other planets and met exotic space women.

George Van Tassel was a friend to visitors from outer space. He founded and ran the Universal College of Wisdom, and re-wrote the Bible from the spacemen's point of view, including the revelation that Mary was assigned the birth of Jesus by her boss in outer space. She was made pregnant in space, and landed here on earth, where Joseph was picked as Jesus' step-father. Van Tassel hosts the annual Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention at his landing strip in California. It's attended by every big name in the business, and had been covered by *Life* and *Harper's*. Nebel was invited to attend the convention but declined, citing his fear of flying as the reason.

George King, from England, boasted contact with creatures from other planets. He was challenged on the show one night by Jackie Gleason, who called him a phony and a liar, and suggested he get legal aid from his Martian friends to sue Gleason for libel.

Buck Nelson was an Ozark farmer who claimed to have been visited in his backyard by folks from Venus. They left with him a 385-pound shaggy-haired Venusian dog named "Bo." Nelson combed Bo and offered the dog's hair for sale at one of Van Tassel's conventions. (How did Nebel miss this gaff when he was selling on the streets of New York?)

Otis T. Carr billed himself as a scientist. He worked closely with a promotional wizard named Norman Colton. Together, they not only provided Nebel listeners with hours of unbelievable and entertaining dialogue, but also managed to entice Nebel onto an airplane for a trip to Frontier City, Oklahoma. This latter achievement is more significant than one might imagine, for Nebel hates to fly. He's petrified in an airplane.

Carr spent most of his working years as a night desk clerk in various hotels. He used the free time inherent in these jobs to study physical and metaphysical laws. His longest tenure as a desk clerk was in a hotel where one of the permanent residents was the famed inventor, Nikola Tesla. Carr spent every available moment with Tesla, listening to him expound his theories and buying peanuts for the pigeons that flew freely in and out of Tesla's room. According to Carr, Tesla revealed fantastic scientific secrets that were never told to another living soul.

After many years, Carr decided it was time to put the theories into practice. He formed OTC Enterprises, Inc. Its purpose was to design, construct, manufacture, promote, and merchandise the "OTC-X1 Circular Foil Spacecraft."

According to Carr, he'd discovered how to capture and utilize the "gravity factor," in revolving machines. He said he could control "free energy," which was everywhere, and build a spaceship to go up to the moon. This theory was published in the OTC Enterprises' *Information Bulletin No. 3*, dated December 23, 1957.

OTC Enterprises, Inc., published many information bulletins. It also produced expensive and elaborate promotional brochures

extolling the company and its aims. These brochures told of plans to produce a "family-sized" OTC-X₁ Circular Foil Spacecraft, forty-five feet in diameter. It had a range of one thousand miles, and carried three people. Its cost, delivered within twenty-four months of the order, was twenty-million dollars. Buying in quantity brought the price down to only four-million per craft. You could order a larger model with a breadth of one hundred feet, or a smaller model, ten feet in diameter that would cost, when fully developed, "less than an automobile."

The man behind the merchandising of OTC Enterprises was Norman Colton. A small, dark-haired, blue-eyed man, who dressed well and talked even better, Colton dominated most of the Nebel shows on which he and Carr appeared. He was capable of dazzling a questioner with confusion, his fluid, verbose answers to Nebel's questions beyond comprehension.

Nebel received a call from Colton in March of 1959. Colton told him the prototype of the OTC-X₁ spacecraft would be launched on Easter Sunday, from a launch pad in Frontier City, Oklahoma, near Oklahoma City. Colton wanted Nebel there to report the event firsthand.

Nebel went. He took with him a few of his closest panelists: insurance man Al Lottman; Sgt. Morris Paley; photographer Sam Vandivert; cyberneticist Ben Isquith; and author-lecturer Ellery Lanier (more on some of these people later).

The plane carrying the Nebel caravan made three stops before landing in Oklahoma City at 3 A.M. on Friday morning. As they stepped from the plane, they were greeted by a welcoming party of cowboys, Indians, and representatives of OTC Enterprises. The cowboys started shooting blanks at the Indians, and the Indians did war dances, and someone hung Nebel in effigy from a nearby lamp post. It was a rousing Oklahoma welcome for Long John, the mysterious radio personality from New York.

Al Lottman drove the car in which Nebel rode. A four-cycle police motorcycle escort was with them, two in front, two in the rear, their red lights flashing.

The ride to the motel is best described by Lottman. He said during a lengthy taped interview:

". . . the whole thing was madness. There I am, a nice Jewish boy from New York, with my Italian shoes and black raincoat,

and all those crazy cowboys and Indians are yelling and shooting. I'm driving a big Oldsmobile and Nebel is slouched down in the back—I'm following the two cops in front of me and we're going through red lights and Nebel is screaming at me, 'Watch it, Al! You went through a light, Al! Watch it, Al!—WATCH IT, AL!' and I'm yelling at him to shut up: 'Of course I'm going through lights, John. The *cops* are going through lights' . . . And I was tired from the trip and all I could think of was here was this big radio hero, Nebel, from New York, scared to death in the back seat of the car."

They arrived at their motel at 4:30, checked in, and gathered together for something to eat in the coffee shop, which had been kept open especially for Nebel. A young man came in and introduced himself as a local radio newsman. He said there was great skepticism about the scheduled launch, and told Nebel he'd discovered where the spacecraft was hangered. He suggested they drive out there to do some preliminary investigating. Nebel agreed. The party drove to the Oklahoma farmland where the newsman said they'd find the craft. As they drove, a violent electrical storm poured torrential rain on them.

They arrived at a warehouse in the middle of a muddy field. Four men stood guard outside. Nebel approached and asked to be allowed inside to inspect the craft. The guards refused, until Nebel told them he was the special guest of Mr. Carr and Mr. Colton. Reluctantly, the guards opened the doors. Inside was a six-foot aluminum spacecraft guarded by four other men. This was the craft that would be launched to prove Carr's theories about the use of "free energy" and how it could be harnessed to break away from the earth's gravitational pull. The Nebel party was allowed to look at it only from a distance; close inspection was prohibited.

The skies cleared on Saturday. Nebel and his crew were taken to the amusement park at Frontier City where the launch was scheduled to be held. They walked past a mock-up of the Carr spacecraft which, when completed, would allow visitors inside for twenty-five cents. The craft they'd seen in the warehouse was not, as yet, at the launch site.

As they were strolling across the fairgrounds, a beautiful blonde in a tight sweater and short skirt came up to Lottman.

"Are you with the radio crew from New York?" she asked. Lottman confirmed that he was.

The girl introduced herself. She made it plain during their brief conversation that she was very interested in him, and wanted to spend some time with him that night. "I was flattered," says Lottman. "I figured my New York charm was really working out there in the sticks. I invited her to a party being held in Nebel's honor that night."

The party was attended by local civic leaders, and by the elite of the occult and flying-saucer world who'd traveled to Oklahoma to witness the launch. Lottman arrived early; the girl showed up fifteen minutes later. She spotted Lottman, went directly to him, and gave him a long, passionate kiss. Almost speechless, Lottman asked her what she wanted to drink and went to the bar to fill the order. As he stood in line, he started talking to someone from Oklahoma City. The man kidded Lottman about the kiss he'd received from the girl.

"You'd better watch out for her," the man said. "She's an investigator from the DA's office."

It was true. The girl had been assigned by the state to find out all she could about Otis T. Carr and his corporation for possible fraud charges. Lottman, it seemed, looked like the one in Nebel's party who might know the most and talk the fastest. He avoided her the rest of the evening.

Sunday. Three P.M. The Fairground, Frontier City, Oklahoma. Launchtime! *Nothing!* Major Wayne Aho, an associate of Carr's, gave a long speech. He talked until almost five o'clock. Suddenly, the loudspeaker system blared: "All members of the press, please come to the main fairgrounds office." A newspaperman in the Nebel group hurried over, and then came back with the news: the launch was cancelled. There had been, according to a Carr spokesman, a mercury leak. They expected it to be fixed within a few days.

Nebel wanted to talk to Carr. He hadn't shown up at the fairgrounds. Nebel found him in a local hospital where, he claimed, he was being checked for a throat irritation. Using a Mohawk portable tape recorder, Nebel interviewed Carr at his bedside.

The tapes were played on Nebel's WOR show. Carr and

Colton made subsequent appearances. The OTC-X1 spacecraft never got off the ground. And listeners to Long John Nebel were in on every detail of the adventure.

Nebel's decision to align himself with the strange and unusual continued to assert itself. Had he been starting today, he might have chosen sex or religion. In the fifties, however, discussions pertaining to sex had to be handled very gingerly and religion wouldn't have worked because Nebel would never have been allowed to attack it. He chose the kooks, and the kooks carried him to success. He became known as the strange guy who broadcast at strange hours and interviewed strange people.

All the Nebel shows on WOR were not, however, devoted to outer space and the occult. His interest in medicine led to many programs with doctors, both legitimate and illegitimate. He dealt with consumer problems, politics, and Yoga. During one month—August 1960—his thirty programs covered the following subjects:

- European society; a special report on an execution at Sing Sing
- Modern philosophy
- Guns
- Crafts and hobbies
- Submarines
- Hillbilly humor
- The Middle East
- The American consumer
- India
- ESP
- Woman's place in the world
- Pastors, witchcraft, and murder
- American politics
- The "one world" philosophy
- Houdini
- Parapsychology
- Literature
- Famous courtroom trials
- Controlling the weather through thought
- The United Nations
- Building pipe organs
- Rome and Paris for tourists
- Art films; voodoo

Exposé of a spiritualist colony
Corporation monsters
The Sacco-Vanzetti debate
Narcotics
Folk music

He was rolling, and he was a man to be reckoned with in the broadcasting industry.

He was not, however, rolling with Helen. Their relationship was cooling off. There were no outside distractions, no other man, no other woman. But things just weren't going as smoothly as they had been. Both were busy with their respective careers. Nebel continued to spend as much time as possible with his daughter, Jackie, and this, according to him, annoyed Helen.

"No," says Helen, "It did not bother me. I think John was looking for reasons."

Nebel's list of friends grew rapidly, most coming from the panelist ranks. One was science-fiction writer Lester del Rey, who declined his first invitation to appear on the show. He later spoke to a science-fiction gathering in Newark and blasted away at his favorite target, flying saucers. He also threw a few barbs at Nebel for giving publicity to flying-saucer advocates. Nebel heard about his remarks and insisted, on the air, that del Rey repeat them in a face-to-face discussion on the show. This time del Rey agreed to come, and soon became one of the show's most frequent panelists.

"It was a real family," del Rey says, "a very close and friendly club. When I first went on the show, John was doing it from the studios at 1440 Broadway. When we got off the air at five in the morning, we used to go to the Governor Cafeteria, just down the street, and sit around until nine or ten continuing the discussion that we'd begun on the show. On Sunday mornings, when we went off the air at five-thirty, John would call ahead to Lou at the Carnegie Delicatessen, who would have a big table ready for us when we arrived."

Del Rey, together with his wife Evelyn, also saw John and Helen socially. He found Helen to be a charming, bright, and totally independent woman, and feels that Nebel began to suffer guilt over their illicit relationship. "John was always a moralist,"

del Rey says. "He could drop his morality for a given period of time, but a residue always remained to haunt him. I don't think Helen cared about the fact they weren't married, but John did. He didn't want to get married, but he had trouble living with it."

Long John Nebel has been on the air over twenty-five thousand hours, and there have been many memorable programs in that span of broadcasting time. Each panelist has certain shows that he or she recalls with special delight. Generally, these favorite shows are those that resulted in someone—guest or panelist—being "put on" by Nebel and friends. Of course, listeners to Nebel have been put on by him for years.

Lester del Rey recalls one night when the guest was a reverend who claimed to have the powers of astroprojection, that mysterious ability to project one's self from the body to other places. Del Rey didn't think much of him as a guest. Nebel wasn't too happy with him, either.

At one point during the show, Nebel left the studio for fifteen minutes, leaving del Rey and the other panelists to carry on. When he returned, he opened the phones for listeners to call in and suggested that they put the reverend to a test.

"The reverend didn't like it at all," del Rey recalls. "He was visibly nervous."

The first call was from a husky-voiced bartender in Jersey City. He told the reverend that he didn't believe a word of his pitch, and tossed a challenge at him. What he asked the reverend to do was to astroproject himself to the street in front of the bar, describe the car that was parked there, and read off its license plate number.

The reverend balked. He claimed that all the electricity in the radio station watered down his astroprojection abilities. Nebel went after him. Do it, or shut up and get off the air. The reverend agreed to try. A hush fell over the studio as the reverend put himself into a trance. Soon he began talking.

"The car is yellow—a convertible. . . ."

The bartender gasped. "That's right!"

The reverend gasped a little, too. Then he continued to slowly give the car's license numbers. Again, the bartender said that the reverend was absolutely correct.

When the show was over, the reverend walked out of the studio with his head high and his reputation intact. But what Nebel had done during his fifteen-minute absence from the show was to call a friend who owned a bar in Jersey City, and tell him to phone in his "challenge" to the reverend and to verify everything he said. Not only was the audience conned—the guest was, too.

Del Rey also laughs when he recalls a show with a sixty-five-year old woman who'd written a book on old mansions in Manhattan. When Nebel asked the first question of her, the guest took from her oversized handbag a card file. She thumbed through it, extracted a card, and read her answer from it.

Nebel and the panel tried for an hour to shake the woman into answering spontaneously. They failed. She was ignored for the rest of the evening—something Nebel does very effectively when disappointed in a guest—and everything *but* old mansions was discussed.

Another panelist who became a very close friend was the previously mentioned Al Lottman. Lottman, a dapper, animated man who makes the typical New Yorker sound cultured, was first introduced to Nebel by a girl friend who worked as a public relations representative. Lottman took her to dinner one night. She explained it would have to be an early dinner because she was escorting a client to the Long John Nebel radio show on which her client was to be a guest. Lottman had never heard of Nebel, but asked if he could come along.

Nebel's producer at that time was Paris Flammonde, who told Lottman he could sit quietly in the studio. During the one o'clock break, Nebel came over and asked Lottman to run downstairs and buy some snacks for the panel. Lottman did as he was asked. At two o'clock, Nebel again asked him to run an errand.

"I'm not your errand boy," Lottman said.

Nebel turned on his heel and went to the control room. Moments later, Flammonde came in and told Lottman he'd have to leave the studio and sit with the engineer.

As Lottman and his date were driving home, she mentioned that Nebel considered him a wise guy. "I'd like to have him on some night and tear him up," Nebel had told her.

A few days later, Lottman addressed a gathering of insurance men on the lack of positive public relations in the insurance industry. He mentioned during his talk that he'd been invited to appear on a leading New York radio show hosted by Long John Nebel. The audience applauded.

Lottman forgot about it until he started receiving calls from insurance men who'd been in his audience. They were all looking forward to his appearance on the show.

He stopped in at WOR the next afternoon and asked to see Nebel. When the receptionist rang his office, Nebel said he'd never heard of anyone named Lottman, but after some debate, finally agreed to see him.

"He looked at me as though I were an idiot!" Lottman says. "I had to explain all about myself and why I wanted to be on the show."

Nebel told Lottman he'd decide about having him on after seeing an outline of what he wanted to talk about.

Together with a colleague, Lottman came up with an outline that satisfied Nebel. The show went well, as Lottman recalls it. He was reserved because he was scared; usually he is the most bombastic of all the Nebel panelists.

After the show, Nebel took him aside and asked him to be his insurance agent.

"It was crazy," Lottman says. "He didn't like me, and hardly knew me, but he wanted me to handle all of his insurance."

They quickly became friends. This doesn't often happen with Nebel. He usually hesitates about getting close to anyone until time and circumstance have removed any doubts about motives.

"My next appearance happened when I was just sitting around watching them do a program on personal finance. I was in the control room, and Nebel came out and said he wanted me to get on the phone with the guest and tear him up."

Nebel went back into the studio and told the guest he was calling his personal financial advisor. He pretended to call Lottman at home, apologized for waking him, and asked for his comments on the subject. Lottman and the guest argued for twenty minutes.

As Long John Nebel proceeded to build his show, he formu-

lated certain techniques that he felt added to its effectiveness and impact. One had to do with his treatment of guests prior to the show. Nebel refuses to acknowledge a guest until air time. Guests are seated in a waiting room, where their only contact is the show's producer. Panelists are cautioned not to engage in preshow conversation with a guest, the rationale being that such off-the-air chitchat takes the edge off on-the-air debate. Actually, this isolation policy for the guest was established for deeper reasons. Nebel wants a nervous guest. Nervousness leads to a defensive posture; defensive postures lead to hostility; hostility leads to a good fast opening.

The lack of acknowledgment of a guest carries right into the studio. After guests and panelists have been seated, Nebel walks in seconds before air time. He does not say hello, does not even nod or smile. When the red light comes on signaling that the mikes are live, he hits the guest with his first words, usually a tough, unexpected question. The guest's hostility, fermented by Nebel's complete lack of cordiality, often takes over.

There was a time when Nebel carried his conditioning of guests to the extreme. A microphone, on which Nebel was listening in, was planted in the guest's waiting room. The producer of the show, while going through the routine of having the guest sign release forms, casually asked whether there were any areas of discussion the guest wished to avoid on the show. The moment the red light flashed on in the studio, the first question put to the guest involved one of the taboo areas. One prominent panelist described what seems to be the consensus of first-timers on the show: "The first question from John is like being kicked in the groin." The guest's shock and confusion sometimes resulted in his falling apart at the microphone. A few stormed out of the studio. Some were asked to leave after their fear gave way to open warfare. The important result of this technique was that it worked—the Nebel show seldom got off to a slow start. And for Nebel the showman, that was what counted.

Nebel's harsh handling of guests and telephone callers causes many listeners to hate him; they say he is nothing but an arrogant, rude man. He does, of course, *sound* arrogant and rude,

but he is also savvy and calculating. His handling of people on the show is pure showmanship spiced with a natural impatience. Nebel does not suffer fools or charlatans easily.

Nebel's corps of regular panelists has been developed from a variety of sources. In every case, the panelists made the effort to become associated with the show. It can be no other way with Nebel. He never *invites* someone to be a guest. The guest must seek him out through the publicity department at a publishing house or other professional source. It is Nebel's belief that once you *invite* someone to appear as a guest, you lose control.

Barry Farber, whose all-night show on WOR provided Nebel with his prime competition for many years, admires Nebel's position concerning the booking of guests. "When I first became aware that John refused to chase a guest, no matter how big a name he was, I thought it was just the action of an egocentric man. Now I realize it was genius. When the clock begins to stretch out, it's very hard to attack a guest who's there only because you or your producer begged his PR girl to get him for the show. Your ability to effectively deal with him is mortgaged. You can't spring the length of your chain and sink your fangs in him. But when they've asked to be on, you're home free."

Farber came to New York as the producer of the "Tex and Jinx Show" on WNBC. When the show moved to WOR in 1958, he looked forward to meeting Long John for the first time. "My roommate turned me on to him," says Farber. "Meeting him was very exciting. I wasn't disappointed. He has the figure to go with his radio image. He was very unaffected by his success, and was nice to me. You don't always see that in this business."

"What I owe most to John Nebel," quips Farber, "is my salary. Up until Nebel made all-night talk popular, station management considered that time of night to be a poverty pocket. Being on all night was supposed to be a privilege for the performer. When Nebel went to WNBC for a fat salary, it made WOR sit up and take notice."

John Nebel's panelists come from a variety of backgrounds. They seem united only in their admiration for their radio host.

Attorney Kenneth Knigin took the route to the show that bad

novels are made of. He was a guest on an afternoon Nebel show, and wanted to be invited back. Knigin, who admits he will never be cited for humility and reserve, began hanging around Louise's, Nebel's favorite restaurant in those days. He knew Nebel ate there most nights of the week and figured he'd be able to renew their relationship. He approached Nebel at his permanently reserved table, reintroduced himself, and suggested they do a show on divorce.

"John was never particularly kind or gracious to me," Knigin says. "He always knew he was in the seat of power with his panelists. He had that 'hot mike' theory, which was true—all of us were looking for a microphone to satisfy our egos. As I became more secure in my profession, I fought back. But in the beginning, he totally dominated me, and I was willing."

Knigin continues: "John dominates everyone. When I first started to do the show, he told me he was building me as a panelist and that I should listen to him when he told me things. I thought he meant about radio, but he told me how to live my life. He told me where to buy shoes that would look better than the ones I was wearing. He told me where to get my hair cut, and what to eat. He does it with everybody. It's a combination of sincerely wanting to help and a psychological need to control. The closer you become to him, the more he criticizes you. It's like having a father or a professor around. Once, when I didn't pay my butcher's bill, the butcher called the Nebel office and told John about it. If my butcher only knew how effective it was! Nebel lectured me for a half hour on my responsibilities as a panelist, attorney, and citizen [presumably in descending order of importance to Nebel]."

Nebel and Knigin didn't talk for a year in the early sixties because Knigin blew up over what he considered Nebel's interference in his personal life. They were later brought back together through friends.

"John is an incredible paradox," says Knigin. "He's the most generous guy I know. He'll do anything for you. Friendship with him means being closer than most friends ever become. But the friendship is delicate. It can blow up for the damndest, most insignificant things. With all his tough talk on the air, he's extremely sensitive."

Sandy Teller is Nebel's closest friend. The panelist's chair is permanently reserved for Sandy on Saturday nights. Nebel says, tongue in cheek, that he would prefer to tape his Saturday night show, but Sandy needs a place to go. Most Saturday nights find Nebel and Teller doing the show without a guest. This type of show is known as a "jackpot show," one in which no single subject is discussed. Teller usually arrives unshaven and in casual clothes. He carries the day's newspapers and a selection of Entenmann's baked goods. They ramble for almost six hours, taking phone calls and dreaming up wild stories to entertain the listeners.

Teller, whose firm is called Sanford Teller Communications, specializes in financial public relations and marketing. He's thirty-five years old. Bright and quick, he ranks second only to Al Lottman in audience recognition. His introduction to Nebel was on a professional level. He was working as a public relations consultant for the West German Camera Industry in 1963. Bill Clark, the editor of an important photographic trade magazine, asked if Sandy could arrange to have him go on the Long John Show to publicize the magazine's twentieth anniversary.

Teller knew of Nebel, but had not heard him broadcast. After listening a few nights, he dialed WOR's number and asked to be connected to the Nebel office. Within seconds, a man answered the phone. Teller immediately recognized Nebel's voice.

"Mr. Nebel?" Teller asked.

"No, Mr. Nebel is away from the office. This is his assistant. May I help you?"

Teller was faced with a dilemma. He wanted to say he knew it was Nebel, but realized it would probably cause him to hang up. He played the game, spending twenty minutes outlining the reasons for having Bill Clark on the show. When he was finished selling, the man on the phone said he would pass the information along to Mr. Nebel. He took Teller's phone number.

Within minutes, Teller's phone rang.

"Mr. Teller, this is Long John Nebel. My assistant said you called."

Again, Teller wanted to say he knew what was going on. But he restrained himself.

"My assistant told me a little of your idea, Mr. Teller, but I wonder if you would tell me personally."

Despite his anger, Teller went through the twenty-minute spiel again. When he was through, Nebel said he'd think about it, said goodbye, and hung up. A few days later Teller was contacted by the producer and the show was scheduled for September 23. To his surprise, he was told that Nebel also wanted him on the show with Clark.

Teller was thrilled. Before getting into public relations, he'd written comedy for "Monitor's" revival of "Duffy's Tavern." He loved show business; the Nebel "hot mike" theory was at work again.

Clark was ill on the day of the scheduled broadcast and couldn't make the show. A substitute guest proved boring, leaving Nebel, Teller, and another panelist to carry it. It turned out well, although judging from Teller's account about his initial meeting with Nebel, it promised to be anything but pleasant.

"He was a bastard," Teller says. "He was tall, and had a crew cut that made him look like a drill sergeant. He was cold and arrogant to me and everyone else. I figured a show's host would at least smile, even if it were phony. But Nebel was just cold and impersonal. I instantly hated him."

Once the show started, however, Teller saw a different Nebel.

"He was warm, and interested in what everyone had to say. I watched him work, and realized what a master he was at dragging out of people those things that make a show interesting."

Teller's relationship with Nebel, like Knigin's, has had its ups and downs. Two months after he had been established as a regular panelist, he received a call at home from Nebel. The call woke him; it was five minutes to midnight.

"You're off the show," Nebel snapped.

"What?"

"You're off the show, Sandy." Nebel's voice was firm, dramatic.

"I don't understand," Teller said.

Nebel explained. Terry Becker, a TV producer of the "Clay Cole Show," who had met Teller through Teller's association with the "Wrangler Jean" account, had written a letter to

WOR's management praising Teller's ability on radio and suggesting that WOR might benefit from his having his own show.

"You put him up to it, didn't you?" Nebel said.

"I didn't, John."

"You're off the show. I'm going on the air."

Nebel hung up.

Two months passed before they spoke again. Teller, who was working for Ruder and Finn, received a terse call from Nebel. "We're doing a show on dieting next Thursday. You want to be on?"

"Sure."

"OK."

To this day, Nebel believes Teller had something to do with the Becker letter, and cites it as an example of his capacity to forgive indiscreet ambition. Teller continues to deny he was involved.

Other panelists introduced to the public during the early WOR days include Charles Leedham, now commissioner of New York City's Department of Marine and Aviation, who came on the show as the author of a book, *Dog Obedience Training*. He'd been a television producer in England, and was working in New York as a free-lance writer. One night he heard Nebel talking about the planet Pluto being named by Percival Lowell. Leedham wrote Nebel a letter reminding him that the Earth had been named by Elizabeth Arden. Nebel enjoyed the letter, and invited Leedham to appear. He quickly became a regular, and took part in some of the show's memorable put-ons, including the "White Line of Equador."

Leedham and Nebel also informed the audience of their invention—a camera that took photographs of things fifteen minutes into the future. Its only drawback was that it took twenty minutes to develop the film, thus rendering it useless for practical application.

"Nebel and I had a falling-out after I'd been on the show a few years," says Leedham. "John is basically a very insecure person. He began to feel I was trying to take the show away from him, and he stopped having me on. You can certainly understand those fears. New York radio is cut-throat. John never seemed to realize that, despite his lack of experience in the

business and his lack of a formal education, there was no one who could do his show as well as he did."

Even when Leedham was no longer appearing on the show, his friends frequently told him that Nebel had mentioned him on the air, plugging his books and saying what a great writer he was. Other panelists who, for one reason or the other, are no longer appearing, find the same thing happening. Nebel never has a bad word to say on the air about anyone. Even those who have legitimately done something to offend or threaten him find themselves being talked about with affection and respect.

Ed Springarm holds a Ph.D. in English from Columbia University. He teaches English and speech at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. Listeners are enthralled by Springarm's deep, resonant voice, though panelists are often bored with his excruciatingly long dissertations. He claims to be the original Nebel panelist, having done his first show in November 1958, and calculates he's been on over three hundred times.

"I was fascinated with the way Nebel used his eighth-grade education as a tool," says Springarm. "He used it like the country boy who said he didn't understand all those big-city words until it came time to divide the money. Nebel is inherently bright. He has great intelligence, and time after time I've seen him convince a guest that his lack of education handicapped him in dealing with the subject under discussion. Then, *zap!* he nails him against the wall with knowledge he's picked up just by listening."

Springarm, like all the other panelists, agrees Nebel is an insecure man. Seated behind a microphone, he appears to be the most self-confident individual one is likely to meet. Personally, he cannot accept his success. He could more easily understand and accept his failure.

"John Nebel is a deadly combination of hedonist and Calvinist," says Springarm. "While he's telling you he's planning to commit suicide within the hour, he's making a phone call to arrange for cable TV to be installed in his apartment the following week." Springarm says he has purposely avoided becoming too close to Nebel over the years. He has visited Nebel's

apartment only once in sixteen years, and that was by accident. He feels that people who get too close to Nebel ultimately weaken their relationship with him. Distance, Springarm contends, breeds a better friendship with John Nebel.

There is some truth in what Springarm says, but it's not absolute. Sandy Teller, Kenneth Knigin, Gene Sanger, and Hanna and Milton Kapit, to name a few, are close to Nebel, and have been for many years. There have been tiffs, but the friendships remain solid.

Jim Donnelly, president of an organization called Parents' Aid Society of New York, became involved with Nebel one snowy winter's evening. He was listening to the show in his Manhattan apartment. The subject was hypnosis. Donnelly became so incensed at what was being said that he climbed into his car and drove to the transmitter at Carteret, New Jersey. The engineer told him the show was being done in New York. Donnelly drove back to the city through the storm, went to WOR, and insisted on speaking with Nebel. After his credentials were established, Nebel allowed him to sit in on the show. He soon became a regular.

Publisher Lyle Stuart first met John Nebel when he published a book by Jim Peck called *We Who Would Not Kill*, which took up the position for conscientious objectors. The Nebel show was the only one in New York that would touch the subject—especially impressive to Stuart in view of Nebel's conservative political posture—and it was something Stuart never forgot. He considers Nebel to be the most courageous broadcaster on New York radio.

Stuart and Nebel share the experience of becoming successes without formal schooling. Stuart recalls one night when the guest on the show was New York State Conservative Party chairman, Kieran O'Doherty. During a heated exchange, O'Doherty questioned Stuart's ability to deal with sophisticated political debate when he lacked even a high school diploma. Nebel, who had previously bowed out of the discussion, leaped in and joined Stuart in the attack. After the show, Nebel continued to defend the publisher's lack of formal education to O'Doherty, their harsh words almost leading to physical combat.

"John is very sensitive about some areas," says Stuart. "He

builds a wall around himself concerning certain things, and either won't deal with them or overreacts to them."

Their friendship is conducted along unquestioned guidelines. As hard as Stuart tries to entice Nebel to large social gatherings, he has never succeeded. "How many people will there be there?" Nebel always asks when invited anyplace by anyone. If the answer is more than four, it's unlikely he will accept the invitation. One exception has always been invitations extended by Danny Bergauer, owner of Manny's Music Store in New York. His relationship with Nebel goes back to 1961, when friends told him Nebel was always talking about the store on his WOR show. Bergauer wrote and thanked Nebel for the kind words.

When they finally met in 1963, Nebel mentioned that he often stopped to admire Manny's window displays. And while he himself had never been inside the store, he had an expensive set of bongo drums from there which a close friend, a bandleader, had purchased in his behalf at a professional discount. It was then that he learned from Bergauer that the bandleader had paid even less for the drums than he had charged Nebel. That was the end of his relationship with the bandleader.

"John is always afraid that someone will take advantage of his relationship with him and the show," says Bergauer. "It has happened."

One panelist charged hundreds of dollars of clothing, using his connection with the show as collateral. Another, doing the same thing, ran up exorbitant restaurant bills. Such incidents are particularly unfortunate because no one is more generous with his name and reputation than Nebel. His years on the show have brought him into contact with every conceivable supplier of merchandise and services. A word to him, and he's making calls to arrange special treatment for you. He gets annoyed if you don't take advantage of his generosity, but to abuse it without his knowledge is to bring an instant end to the relationship. Still, as previously mentioned, he will continue to talk about the violator on the air in glowing terms.

Borrowing money from John Nebel is an experience. He will pick up expensive restaurant tabs week after week, and laden

you with gifts. But borrow five dollars from him and you can count on being reminded of the debt every time you see him. He's compulsive about debts being repaid. It's one of the rules of the fraternity.

"His generosity is unquestioned," says Lyle Stuart. "When he was making peanuts at WOR, he always bought expensive Christmas gifts for everybody at the station—cleaning women, page boys, engineers, secretaries." Unlike many gift-givers who are trying to buy appreciation and respect, Nebel seems embarrassed by the recipient's gratitude. He displays his generosity in many anonymous ways; old women sleeping in Manhattan doorways often wake up in the morning to find a five-dollar bill tucked in their shopping bags, a gift from Nebel as he passed by on his way home. When Lillian's mother was hospitalized in October of 1965, he quietly paid for her private nurses. He gives a great deal, but has trouble accepting.

"John feels so much better when he is the giver," says Hanna Kapit. "He seems to feel that being given something places a responsibility on him. It's as if he doesn't feel he deserves to be given anything."

Bob Carson, financial public relations consultant, joined the show as a regular panelist after writing Nebel a letter. He finds that Nebel today is different from the man he met at WOR. "In those days at WOR, everything had a nice crumbiness about it—the studio, the equipment, and Nebel. He used to do the show in very casual clothes—sweaters, baggy pants, loafers. The atmosphere around the green felt table was loose and comfortable. I think his move to WNBC and its impressive studios changed many things, including his appearance. He always dresses nicely now and even wears a tie. I liked doing the old shows."

Carson is a big fellow. He weighs almost three hundred pounds. The comfortable attire worn at WOR would naturally please him, for he is not one of New York's fashion leaders.

"The shows used to be wild," he says. "We had a three-time loser from Sing Sing on one night. A lady called and told the producer she was his wife, and that their son was ill. The former convict told Nebel he wasn't married and didn't have a son. We left the studio that morning very apprehensive, looking over our shoulders all the way home."

A controversial program like Nebel's brings its share of threats. On his first night on the air at WMCA in August 1971, a telephoned bomb threat was received by the station. His mail has always reflected a core of demented hatred in some of his listeners. And there was the famous "lady in black." She first appeared one rainy night as Nebel was leaving 1440 Broadway to go to dinner at Cheers Restaurant, a steak house owned by his friend, Monte Feuerstein. It was seven o'clock. Nebel was standing in the building's lobby before venturing out into the rain, when he noticed a woman approaching him from the shadows—a tall slender gal dressed completely in black and carrying a black umbrella.

"Are you Long John?" she asked.

He confirmed that he was.

"You know me, don't you," she said.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid I don't."

"John," she said softly, "of course you know me. You've been sleeping with me every night for a week."

Both of Nebel's initial reactions proved wrong. The lady was not trying to be funny, nor was she looking to stir up trouble through false accusations. She actually *believed* that Nebel had astroprojected his body every night from the studio to her bedroom. Nebel managed to escape her that evening, but not forever. She turned up everywhere over the next several weeks—in restaurants, on the street, on buses and subways. He was frightened and insisted that someone accompany him to and from the studio. Then, the lady in black disappeared.

Bob Orben is another Nebel panelist who started by writing a letter. One of the country's leading and most prolific gag writers (for Red Skelton, Dick Gregory, etc.), he suggested in his letter that Nebel do a show on comedy writers. His first appearance was with Al Lottman who, according to Orben, performed some of his one-liner gags as though he were reading a will. That first show convinced Orben that he should learn how to deliver his own material. He's worked at it, and now demands a good dollar on the lecture circuit.

Pharmacist Alan Cornet called the show in anger over a discussion taking place on fair trade. Nebel invited him on, and he's been a regular ever since. Cornet is a "cause" man—if he

isn't demanding B-52's for Israel, he's calling for the humane treatment of pharmacists. He frankly admits that his first appearance on the show was a disaster. It got so bad that Nebel took him aside in the control room and told him to do a better job of defending himself. He did, weakly, and took many more verbal lumps before learning the art of debate, Nebel-style.

The panelists come and go. Were this a history of the show, to slight them would be a mistake. Nebel's world is expansive; his panelists, friends, and guests provide enough material to fill a *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. They are all bright, verbal, interesting. Sculptor Arnold Bergiere draws Chinese figures while discussing the relative merits of plastic surgery. Dr. Joseph Consentino, a successful and charming plastic surgeon, more of a friend than panelist, politely points out where Bergiere has erred. The late Ben Isquith, obese, brilliant, a cyberneticist and computer genius, got on the show by claiming to be an expert on hoaxes, and carried it off after reading a book on the subject before air time; Hanna Kapit, lovely, smart, lovable; Milton Kapit, educated, literate, and nice all at once; Bentley Kassal, civil court judge in New York, inquisitive and forceful; Charles Ferber, retired head of the Social Security District Office in New York City, seventy-two-years old, and relieved that his retired status gives him more freedom on the air than he had when as a civil servant; Dr. Howard Miller, longtime Nebel friend and one of his uncountable medical advisors; talent manager Murray Becker, who winces when a guest is getting too tough a time from Nebel (Nebel told Becker to stop winking at Arlene De Marco while Nebel was taking her apart pore by pore; Dr. S. K. Fineberg; Seena Hamilton; photographer Sam Vandivert; men's clothing executive Bernie Toll; photographer Roy Schatt; Dr. Theodore Rubin; the Reverend Robert Schrock—and on and on.

"Some panelists don't like me because I'm between them and John," says the show's producer since June 1967, Anne Lombardo (née Pacu'ar), wife of one of the show's former engineers, Victor Lombardo.

Anne had worked on Charlie Weaver's TV show, which was produced by comedian Allan Sherman. Sherman was a Nebel fan, and the radio in his office was usually tuned into Nebel's

program, where Anne first heard her future boss. She later went to Florida to work on the Jackie Gleason show, and also performed as a magician's assistant (her father had been a professional magician) in Florida nightclubs for one of Gleason's moonlighting special-effects engineers, Bob McCarthy.

Anne's first direct contact with Long John Nebel, while she was still working for Sherman, was as a panelist. In those early WOR days, the studio had a Western Union telegraph receiver and instead of calling, listeners sent Nebel telegrams. Anne sent one indicating she'd like to be a panelist.

The first show she was on was devoted to new panelists, a monthly ritual seldom practiced anymore. Nebel, of course, was interested in Anne's background in magic.

She appeared infrequently as a panelist, and continued to send telegrams until she moved back to Florida for the Gleason job. She was working on that show when she received a call from Sam Vandivert, who told her the show's producer, Roberta Kopper, was leaving. Would Anne be interested in working for Nebel? She came up to New York, had two long talks with Nebel, and decided to take the job.

"You'll either like me or hate me," Nebel told her. "Either way, we'll get along fine."

They have gotten along, their respective professionalism carrying them over the rough personal spots. Nebel is as paradoxical in his business life as he is in his personal life. He is, at once, the easiest man to work with in broadcasting, and the most difficult. There is an assumption among many that Nebel is a troublemaker, an egocentric pain-in-the-ass who turns station managers' hair prematurely gray. Nothing could be further from the truth. I could find no one in the business who had worked with or knew Nebel, who didn't agree that he is extremely cooperative. Mike Fahn, general sales manager at WPLJ in New York and formerly an account executive at WMCA, where Nebel now reigns, says that every radio time salesman he's ever met raves about Nebel's cooperation. Some radio personalities have little use for time salesmen. They consider the salesmen's requests for special handling of certain commercials as intrusions into a star's life. Not Nebel. One of the first things he did when moving to WMCA was to host a luncheon for all the station's

salesmen at Ho Ho, his favorite Chinese restaurant. It was not purely an act of altruism. Nebel knows salesmen sell his show. Sponsors keep him on the air. And he also recognizes the salesmen's problems. He was there once. He is never too busy to listen to a salesman's request for special client handling, on the air or off.

"John Nebel is exactly the opposite of what you would expect him to be," says Ken Fairchild, vice-president of WMCA, and its morning man. Nebel worked for Fairchild for a brief period at WNBC when Fairchild was brought up from Houston as program director. Nebel was one of two New York radio personalities whom Fairchild had heard of in Houston, and he says: "I expected to have a lot of trouble with Nebel over contracts and money. "I expected all sorts of problems. But I had less trouble with him than anyone else on the station. He loved to give you a nasty answer, but you knew he was having fun. He's a huckster, a put-on. A marvelous sensitive showman."

Anne Lombardo says: "Actually, I suppose I've had more problems with book publicists than I've had with John or the panelists."

Book publicists, working free-lance or for publishing houses, provide the show with many of its guests. Authors go on to promote their books. Many publishing houses consider the Nebel show a prime publicity outlet for just released books.

Nebel doesn't like to discuss novels on the program because unless the listener has read them, he will be unfamiliar with the characters and situations mentioned. Therefore, it is only when a novel deals with a timely subject, or when it is the work of an author with a sufficiently big name to hold an audience, that it is booked on the show. Nonfiction books are easier to handle because it is their subject matter that is discussed. A Nebel rule is never to criticize the *writing* of any book; he wishes only to concentrate on what the author thinks, not on how he writes.

"John and I frequently talk about the lowering of professionalism in the book-publicity business these days," Anne says. "Many publicists don't even listen to the shows on which they book their authors. They send the authors to the show without any preparation or understanding of how it works. And even when I tell a publicist some of the rules, he or she ignores what I say. It

can be very upsetting. John gets mad and, of course, I'm blamed."

The rules are simple. No one is allowed to accompany the guest except the publicist. If the author's wife or friend wishes to be present, it must be cleared at least a day prior to the appearance. Frequently, an author will arrive with an entourage. They are always told to leave.

Another rule of the show is that a guest must stay for the entire five-and-a-half hours. Anne is specific in telling publicists this. Still, many guests show up and are shocked when they learn they can't leave after an hour or two, unless, of course, Nebel decides to tell them to leave.

Publicists also sometimes fail to inform their authors that they will have to sign two or three releases before going on the show. Some authors balk when handed the papers, causing some interesting reactions from Nebel, who uses these moments to great advantage. An author who questions the releases is told to go home; in most cases, he reconsiders and signs. Nebel, in a grand gesture of humanity, agrees to reconsider his own posture, and allows the guest to participate in the show. It all adds to his control.

There are also rituals to be learned by the panel. The first half hour of every show belongs exclusively to Nebel; he reserves it for his questions, and to violate the code by interrupting is to invite censure.

There is a power structure within the Nebel fraternity that is played out nightly. It was especially evident at WNBC because of the studio seating arrangements, which made the Paris peace talks look like a family buffet supper. There was one long table. Nebel sat in the middle of it on one of the long sides. In front of him was a control unit, telephone, and other broadcasting equipment. The evening's guest always sat at the far end of the table, to Nebel's right. That left two chairs and two microphones across from Nebel on the other side, and one chair and one microphone on the short side to his left, which was reserved for the ranking panelist. I didn't know this the first night I appeared as a panelist. Anne told me to go into the studio. Nebel was not there. I sat down in the left chair, spread my notes, opened the guest's book, lighted a cigarette, and waited.

Two other panelists entered. I rose and introduced myself. One

of them took an empty chair. The other left the studio. A few minutes later, Anne came in and whispered to me, "Can I see you a moment?"

In the control room, she told me I'd have to change my chair. The other panelist had complained.

There is another badge of superiority within the panel. Alan Cornet, the pharmacist, explains it when he says: "I knew I'd arrived when he asked me to drive him home. I was a *star* then. People telling me they heard me on the show, and people writing letters to me at the station, meant nothing. There I was, only on the show a dozen times, and he was asking *me* to drive him home." Most panelists want to drive Nebel home after the show. They all offer. When he says he is driving home with one of the others, disappointed looks flush the faces of the rejected.

Another person who came into the permanent Nebel fold during the early WOR days was Anna Marie Goetz. Nebel dubbed her the show's coordinator in the summer of 1959 because, she claims, he didn't know what else to call her. Nebel is good at bestowing titles. Out-of-work panelists or guests are always introduced on the show as "author and lecturer."

Anna Marie has never worked full-time for Nebel. She was a teacher when she met him, and continues to teach intellectually gifted children in an elementary school in Long Island City. Pleasant, pretty, unflappable, she devotes some of her free time to handling Nebel's correspondence, keeping his financial records, and occasionally producing the show when Anne Lombardo is away.

"I first met John Nebel when I attended a symposium at the Diplomat Hotel. I'd been brought up as a strict Catholic, and had to get permission from my priest because the symposium was held on Good Friday, 1959. I introduced myself to Al Lottman, who was on the panel, and he brought me over to John. I was very impressed because John remembered my name from a fan letter I'd written. And I was even more impressed when he invited me to join them at WOR to watch the show."

After the show, Anna Marie went with them to the Carnegie Delicatessen for breakfast. Nebel was the ringmaster. He had each panelist perform for her. It was all very heady for a young Nebel fan.

Nebel invited Anna Marie to come back to watch the show anytime she wished. She didn't waste much time, showing up again two nights later. She had her first tiff with Nebel that second night. It was over a lady from Maine, who, with her husband, had attended the symposium at the Diplomat.

"Remember that gal from Maine?" Nebel asked Anna Marie. "Yes."

"She's madly in love with me."

"That's ridiculous," Anna Marie blurted out. She didn't wish to offend Nebel, but it was her honest reaction.

"No, it's true," he said.

"I don't believe it. That's egotistical for you to say. You only met her once, and you think she's falling all over you."

"You don't know about those things," Nebel said.

It was the first of many times that Anna Marie Goetz had eventually to admit to Nebel that she was wrong. Her first assignment as a part-time helper was to shield Nebel from the Maine lady, who called every day and asked to come to the show; Anna Marie further discovered she'd been writing Nebel love letters for over a year. The lady soon began to blame Anna Marie for keeping her mail and calls from him, and was so insistent on speaking with him personally that Anna Marie finally told Nebel she could no longer act as a buffer.

When Nebel finally saw the lady from Maine, he had in his office a WOR employee named Mary Manners, who played the role of his wife. The lady from Maine accepted her inevitable defeat and went home to her husband.

Anna Marie became very friendly with Nebel, Helen Noll, and others in the Nebel cast. She fondly recalls those Sundays at the Tudor City apartment when Nebel cooked Chinese food for them. When Nebel and Helen broke up, she was disappointed.

"I really liked Helen," Anna Marie says. "Everybody did. She was completely natural with John and his friends, and she had a great sense of humor about him. He used to do the food shopping, and always bought five or six of everything. Helen would take me into the kitchen and point to the shelves lined with six boxes each of salt, noodles, crackers, and other food items. She always laughed about his overbuying of everything, which was

probably a throwback to his lean days. It was nice that Helen laughed about those things. Charlotte never found it funny."

The Charlotte referred to by Anna Marie Goetz became Nebel's lady. (Charlotte Harrington is not her real name. She was the only one of the Nebel women who refused to be interviewed for this book.) His relationship with her did not overlap his time with Helen, although he knew her before he and Helen physically separated.

John and Helen differ on the reasons for their breakup on November 11, 1960. He claims she was annoyed at not being able to accompany him when he visited Jackie; Helen says that's nonsense. He claims Helen told him to leave; she says he wanted to leave, and did it on his own. Either way, it happened on a Sunday. They'd recently moved from the furnished apartment in which they had been living to a larger unfurnished one in the same building.

"John kept telling me where to buy furniture on sale," Helen says. "He was driving me buggy. I had enough on my mind at the time without worrying about shopping for furniture."

She went to visit her parents in Brooklyn that Sunday morning. When she returned to Manhattan, she bumped into John and two of his friends who had just finished helping him move out of the new apartment.

"I walked with him a few blocks," Helen says. "He was broken up, and kept saying I'd forced him to move. I didn't, but there was no sense arguing. He was going, and it was probably better for both of us. I thought he'd been drinking, and since he drank so little, I was afraid he wouldn't be able to do the show that night."

Nebel vehemently denies having been drinking. He's been accused of being drunk a few times in his life, always after a breakup with a woman. The extent to which these situations depress and upset him could account for behavior that appears to be the result of alcohol. (This writer has never observed Nebel drinking anything alcoholic.)

An occasional telephone conversation over the past thirteen years has been the only contact between Helen and John, except for one afternoon in 1972. He was walking with Sandy Teller. When they met her, Nebel suggested a cup of coffee. Helen

changed it to a drink. "After all the time we spent together, I wasn't going to let him get off the hook with a cup of coffee," she says, laughing.

Charlotte worked as the manager of a dress shop on Broadway, a few blocks from 1440 Broadway, where the WOR studios were located.

"I was with John the day he moved out of Tudor City," says Lottman. "We walked around town and finally decided to get a cup of coffee in a joint on Broadway. He sat there telling me how wonderful Helen was and how upset he was that she broke up their relationship. Then he mentioned the dress shop and the fact he'd bought Helen some clothes there. He also brought up the name of the manager of that shop—Charlotte—and spoke flatteringly of her.

According to Lottman, Nebel dated Charlotte three times by the following Tuesday.

"It was sickening, nauseating," Lottman says, "the way Nebel overindulged her. He didn't pull out the chair for her—he picked her up and put her in it. He bowed and scraped and treated her like a little kid, which she was. He is, too, when it comes to women. It was two seven-year-olds together, not intellectually, but emotionally."

(Nebel's manners are impeccable. This writer's wife has often commented on them. Nebel's wife, the former Candy Jones, becomes incensed when his politeness, especially towards women, is questioned. Her reaction to Al Lottman's frequent barbs about Nebel's manners is to say: "Maybe John should take a day off and teach Al a few manners.")

Charlotte was physically attractive, a roundness bordering on plumpness adding to her sensuality. Her skin was milky-white, and her auburn hair was always carefully coiffured.

"At first, Charlotte was very pleasant to be with," says Anna Marie Goetz. "But after awhile, things got sticky between them and she wasn't as pleasant."

The show is Nebel's true love, his reason for existing. He does not allow personal problems to interfere with it. Yet the women in his life and the problems of each relationship have had some influence in his conduct of the show.

"I learned early in the game never to book female guests on

the show when John was having problems with one of his women," says Anne Lombardo. "Usually, he's very courteous to female guests. But when he was having a go-around with Charlotte, he tore into any female who shared the microphone with him. I used to cringe when a female guest was booked far in advance, and he had one of his fights with Charlotte the afternoon of the show. She was a doomed guest."

Al Lottman, who has been Nebel's chief confidant during most of his female relationships, says Nebel puts women on a pedestal. "The minute they stray from his preconceived image of what a woman is supposed to be, it's the end for him."

The affair with Charlotte proved to be an emotional disaster. Nebel's paradoxical nature was hard at work in the relationship. He catered to her, yet at times resented the need to do so. She often called him at WOR, just before he was to go on the air, and her calls invariably upset him. Still, when he was confident his panelists could carry on without him for a half hour, he would race home in a cab to bring her Chinese food or a steak.

Charlotte often complained of physical ills. She spent much of her time in bed, although she was not bedridden. During the early years of their "marriage," he was much in demand at nightclub, theater, and motion picture openings. Although Charlotte accompanied John on many of the occasions, Al Lottman recalls hearing her complain that they never went anywhere.

"John got so he hated openings," Lottman says. "But he kept going to keep her happy."

Long John had become an important and recognized New York celebrity. He and Charlotte moved into a large apartment in a luxury high-rise building on the East Side. All the furniture, which he selected, was new. They were living high on Nebel's low income from WOR. He never made more than three-hundred dollars a week there, even when he was doing two television shows. WOR's New York TV outlet, Channel 9, had tried to take advantage of Nebel's radio popularity. It didn't work. WOR-TV had done the shows on a shoestring; the production values were laughable, the technical foul-ups legion. The biggest problem, however, was the star, Nebel. The producer of the show insisted on everything being written out for him, and Nebel doesn't work that way. The free-wheeling success of his marathon, nightly radio

gabfests suited his style and approach perfectly. Reading everything from idiot cards (scripts printed on huge pieces of white cardboard and held up for the TV performer to read) left him almost helpless. That the impact of his TV career was minimal is evidenced by the fact that almost no one in New York can remember seeing Long John on TV. As far as Nebel is concerned, that's a blessing.

TV might have worked for Nebel if they could have filmed the all-night radio shows. But to structure his talent into a tight and preconceived format was to kill it.

Nebel, on radio, continued to prosper. He did a weekend show for station WNAC in Boston, taping it from his apartment in New York. WOR's powerful 50-thousand watt transmitter beamed his outrageous guests and whimsical panel into thirty-five states. Schools around the country, at which future broadcasters are trained, began using tapes of his show as examples of a unique and effective radio style.

"John's reputation was growing bigger and bigger every week," Ken Knigin says. "He was king, and lived up to the title in many ways."

Being a member of the king's retinue—that is, being part of the Nebel fraternity—has both compensations and frustrations. Knigin recalls the nightly ritual at Louise's Restaurant, where Nebel held court. Seating at his dinner table was as structured as seating in the studio. Occupying a chair on either side of him signified you were "in"—at least for that night.

"Dinner is the biggest ritual in Nebel's life," Knigin says.

He's absolutely right. Nebel runs his dinner table like the commander of a panzer division. No one, no matter how close, drops in at the restaurant and sits down with him. Who his companions for dinner are to be is his decision, and his wishes are made known. Charlotte, who occasionally took their building's superintendent's two children to dinner and the theater, was often told to eat with the kids at a separate table because Nebel wished to discuss business at his. He was constantly running over to make sure they had what they wanted, but Charlotte knew better than to suggest joining him and his friends.

Listeners flocked to the Louise's Restaurant in the hope of catching a glimpse of their all-night companion, and even the

panelists picked up a following there. Listeners approached them for autographs, pictures, or just a few words about the show and Long John. Some came to view those they had grown to hate from listening to the nightly show. Lottman had his face slapped one night by a listener. She didn't say a word—just came over from her table, hit him, and went back to her dinner.

"I almost hit Nebel one night," Knigin says. "I came in, only to find Nebel's table full. The place was doing big business; there wasn't an empty table in the house."

Knigin started talking with a woman at the bar who'd heard him on the show. When the table she'd been waiting for was available, she invited Knigin to join her.

They lingered over coffee. Knigin was in the middle of a story when he noticed Nebel motioning for him to come out into the lobby. He faced an angry Nebel, who took him into a phone booth.

"You're tying up a table, Ken," Nebel said. "It isn't fair to the restaurant."

Knigin went back and told his companion they'd have to vacate the table. The woman left, Knigin went to the bar and had a drink with Al Lottman. Suddenly it hit him. How could Nebel have the audacity to tell him to leave the table? He was paying, and could damn well sit as long as he pleased. The anger boiled inside.

"I'm going to punch that son-of-a-bitch in the mouth," he told Lottman. Lottman, having gone through such scenes before, kidded him out of the idea. Later that night, when Knigin showed up for the show, Nebel went overboard to be nice to him. It is this kind of Nebel reaction that fascinates Knigin.

"John feels great guilt," he theorizes. "He acts like a bastard, and then bends over backwards to make it up to you." Nebel also surprises people by unexpected acts of generosity. For example, he bought a panelist a new typewriter because the panelist had been moaning about how he could write a good book if only he had the tools. Another time, one of the captains at Louise's wore a dinner jacket that Nebel considered shabby. He walked in one night and handed the captain a new one.

Nebel hates lateness. His plans are always carefully laid, and

he expects everyone concerned to follow them to the letter. An incident involving Ken Knigin is a good illustration of this:

"One night when I was to be on the show," says Knigin, "I was also supposed to pick up Charlotte and the super's two kids beforehand and bring them to Louise's for dinner with John and me; afterwards Charlotte and the kids were to go on to the theater. Here's the way Nebel gave me the instructions for the night: 'Listen to me Ken—you go over and pick up Charlotte and the kids at six-ten. I'll be at the office—no, make it six-fifteen. Ride over and pick me up at six-twenty-five—no, it will be more like six-thirty—I'll be there at six-thirty. Now don't be late. Have the driver take Forty-ninth Street. We'll go to Louise's. We'll be there about six-forty-five. We'll eat—that'll give us an hour and a half for dinner—no, better cut down on dinner; we'll leave Louise's at eight sharp. That'll give us forty minutes to get them to the theater. The taxi'll only take twenty-five minutes—that'll give them fifteen minutes to find their seats. You and I will then go to the Royal Box at the Americana—they'll have a ringside table waiting for us at nine. We'll just grab dessert and catch the show—the show ends at ten-forty-five. That'll give us fifteen minutes to get back over to the theater and pick up Charlotte and the kids. That'll be eleven. Drop me at the station at eleven-twenty. Take Charlotte and the kids home—and Ken, don't be late—be back to the station by twelve. I want you there when the show goes on. If something goes wrong, I'll cover, but try not to be late.'"

Everyone in the fraternity has his or her favorite Nebel stories. Many deal with situations that caused the panelist inconvenience, lack of sleep, personal upset, and in Knigin's case, heartburn. These tales are never told, however, with bitterness or remorse. There is an abundance of sincere love for Nebel by his friends. He is an unusual, exasperating, amusing, challenging enigma in their lives. He takes from them, and gives to them, a brand of friendship unlike any other. His idiosyncrasies would fill a book. He is capable of handling the most monumental of crisis, yet trips on hairpins and paper clips.

He received a call one afternoon at WOR from Bob Jorrio, the owner of Louise's. Until that call, Nebel's nightly menu never

varied. Shrimp cocktail, steak with radishes, celery and olives—no dessert.

“John, Bob Jorrio. I have a surprise for you. Tonight I’m going to have the chef make you roast chicken. As a special treat.”

Nebel was delighted, according to Knigin. He was like a small boy who’d been told his mother was baking a special pie. He talked about it all the way to the restaurant.

Inside, he and Knigin sat at the regular table. The captain came over and asked whether Nebel would be having his usual dinner.

“Oh, no,” Nebel answered. “Mr. Jorrio is preparing something special for me tonight. Roast chicken.”

The captain went to the kitchen. He returned a few minutes later with an apprehensive look on his face. He’d had to deal with Nebel before when he was displeased.

“Mr. Nebel, I am very sorry, but there has been a mistake. The chef was told to prepare you a broiled chicken.”

Nebel was crushed. His face was that of a man who’d waited in line all night for tickets to a play-off game, only to discover that the guy in front had bought the last one. It was, of course, impossible to prepare a roast chicken on the spot. Broiled, yes.

“Will you have the broiled chicken, Mr. Nebel?”

“No.”

Knigin assumed Nebel would fall back on his usual menu.

“The usual, Mr. Nebel?”

“No, I’m not hungry.”

Knigin’s dinner arrived. He couldn’t eat it. “My stomach was churning as I watched Nebel sit and pout. I just shoved the food around on my plate.” (Friends of Knigin claim he never before in his life failed to eat every scrap put before him).

When Bob Jorrio came in and heard what had happened, he disappeared into the kitchen. He came out a few moments later and asked Nebel if he’d like something that wasn’t on the menu—Welsh rarebit.

Nebel perked up. He enthusiastically agreed to the suggestion. He savored every bite of it as Knigin, now hungry, watched.

“John is happy with anything out of the ordinary. When someone does some little special thing for him, he responds. Jorrio could have suggested anything on the menu and Nebel would

have vetoed it. But the rarebit was special. That made the difference.”

Two deaths of importance to Nebel occurred during the early sixties—one was that of his stepfather, John Aloysius Knebel. Long John rode with the body to the crematorium and stood silently as it was committed to the fire. When it was over, he returned to a compassionate Helen, took care of some business in the afternoon, and did his show at night. His somewhat composed reaction to his stepfather’s death contrasted sharply with his behavior at the funeral of Lillian’s mother, Ma Schubert. John Aloysius Knebel had been a “good guy” in Nebel’s mind. He’d taken his stepson and taught him about life on the road. Losing him was like losing a friend and business associate—unfortunate, sad, but one man goes on without tears after the death of another.

But it was different with Ma Schubert. She’d been a warm, generous woman—like a mother to him—and her loss struck him especially hard. He made the funeral arrangements and greeted people as they came in for the Sunday night service. During it, he broke down and cried. Charlotte, then in the picture, muttered to one of the panelists, “What’s he so upset about? He hardly knew her.”

When Nebel heard of her remark, he became angry and realized his relationship with her would not last. He was resigned to this inevitable change in his personal life, but never dreamed his professional life would also change. He was happy at WOR. They’d given him a chance, at the age of forty-three, to launch a career in radio that had taken him to the heights of the business. Those heights were also known to the management of WNBC, another 50-thousand watt station in New York. Floundering for a format that would give the station an identity with the listening public, WNBC’s management began to think of *talk* to replace a pedestrian music and news operation. And when you think of talk in radio broadcasting, you think of Long John Nebel.

13

"Don't go, John!" *

If ever a radio station needed a format change, it was WNBC in 1963. As the local station of the NBC Radio Network, it had experienced as many format changes as it had changes in management. Program directors and station managers came and went, their efforts doing little to boost the station's ratings.

It couldn't all be blamed on the station's management, however. Because it *was* the New York outlet for the network, network management tended to ignore it as a local radio-station entity. WNBC was vital to insure New York coverage of network programming, particularly news, but no one seemed to care whether or not it successfully competed with other stations in the crowded New York market. The only time management seemed to be concerned was when WNBC placed lower in ratings than the other big network's New York station, WCBS.

In 1963, WNBC's format was known in the trade as "swinging geriatric." Middle-of-the-road music, played by overexposed radio personalities, did little more than hang on to an older audience who *remembered*. In the meantime, other stations were aggress-

* Jean Shepherd, WOR personality

sively pursuing individualized formats and capturing the bulk of the audience.

The only talk format in New York was at WOR. Barry Gray had pioneered talk in New York, and was doing two hours at WMCA. Gray was the first talk personality in New York to conduct phone conversations with listeners. Because he was limited by a lack of technology, callers were not heard over the air by the audience. Gray repeated what a caller said and then answered the question or made his own comments. Nebel, always an admirer of Gray, started talking to listeners on his own show at WOR. With the help of engineer Russell Tinklepaugh, however, he took it a step further. They rigged up the seven-second delay system that is the cornerstone for all two-way telephone talk on radio today. Its concept is simple. Every word that is spoken by the show's host or by a caller is first taped. The tape is then broadcast seven seconds after the words have been recorded. This gives the host a very precious seven seconds in which to stop the tape, if necessary, thus cutting off obscenities and other objectionable remarks.

"Talk radio is much more expensive to produce than music," says Bill Schwarz, hired by WNBC in 1963 to institute a talk format. "Talk personalities cost more than DJ's, although at WOR they were paying incredibly low salaries to their personalities. I couldn't believe what Nebel was making."

NBC handed Schwarz a budget that was inadequate to establish a worthwhile talk format. They suggested he start slowly, slipping talk shows in with the music and news format. It didn't work. The station continued to stumble along, first with rock 'n' roll, then with folk music. Schwarz hired Woodman and Rich, a comedy team from Canada, to try and perk things up. They were talented, but NBC's legal staff kept them under a tight reign. Their zany creativity didn't mix with stolid legal rules. They flopped.

Still, Schwarz continued to seek out personalities who could rise above the music and establish an identity for themselves and the station. An agent for Robert Alda, the actor, stopped in one day and suggested Alda be given a show. Schwarz hired him, and Alda began talking with housewives in the morning. Opera singer Mimi Benzel was hired to do a woman's chitchat show from a

restaurant at noon. Lee Leonard, now host of New York's popular TV show, "Mid-Day," came on board and talked with listeners and interviewed guests in the afternoon. Leonard wanted to do a sports show, his first love, but Schwarz hired Bill Mazer for that job. He turned down a bid from George Skinner to do a husband-and-wife show. A month later, Skinner was hired as general manager, becoming Schwarz's boss.

The first pure talk talent hired by Schwarz was Canadian Brad Crandall. He knew of Crandall's work when he was performing on CKEY in Toronto, one of the stations for whom Schwarz was a consultant during his Westinghouse days. CKEY then went rock 'n' roll, leaving Crandall without a job. Until that time, he'd rejected Schwarz's offers.

Another personality brought to WNBC by Bill Schwarz was Big Wilson. Schwarz knew of Biggie's work in Cleveland, and had admired his warm, humorous air style ever since he first heard him. Wilson had come to New York as the new morning man on WNEW. It didn't take Schwarz long to snatch him away and install him as NBC's morning personality. It was a smart move, because Wilson remains a solid fixture on WNBC and is considered one of the best radio talents in the city.

The first thought of approaching Long John Nebel came from Robert Kintner, president of NBC. A dynamic man who worked closely with Lyndon Johnson during his presidency, Kintner had been a longtime fan of the Nebel show. During a meeting one afternoon with station management, Kintner casually asked whether anyone had thought of making an overture to Nebel. Schwarz had thought of it, of course, but he'd never done more than speculate on the idea. Schwarz was of the opinion that NBC, its parent corporation RCA, and their respective lawyers, would never stand still for Nebel's on-the-air antics. Anything WNBC did had to reflect favorably on RCA, no matter what the ratings.

But this was Robert Kintner suggesting Nebel, which amounted to a papal blessing.

Schwarz had some doubts, however aside from those concerning the reputations of NBC and RCA. He didn't know Nebel, but assumed he was difficult to deal with. Holding hands with talent was a tough enough job without adding someone like

Nebel. *He was difficult, wasn't he?* All you had to do was listen to him on the air to know that.

There was another consideration. WNBC was not broadcasting all night. It went off the air at 2:00 A.M., a staff announcer playing records from midnight until sign-off time. Would it pay? It was paying handsomely for WOR.

Schwarz began calling around town to find out who handled Nebel. When he discovered that Nebel did not use an agent, he called a friend at the William Morris Agency, one of the biggest theatrical management agencies in New York, and asked him to approach Nebel. The agent called Nebel in the spring of 1963 and asked when his contract was up.

"August 17," Nebel answered.

"How would you like to go over to a network, John?"

"Which network?"

"I won't tell you that unless we agree to work together. May I represent you in the deal?"

Nebel agreed, but only for this one deal. He didn't want agent representation as a permanent situation.

The broadcasting industry is a gossipy business. Neither Nebel nor Schwarz wanted anyone to know they were talking about a possible switch. Their first meeting was held in a suite in the New Weston Hotel. Present were Nebel, Schwarz, and the agent from William Morris. Nebel told the agent that he would do his own talking and make his own deals. He was willing to pay the agent's ten percent commission for the introduction, but wanted nothing more from him.

As Schwarz recalls it, the meeting was pleasant. Lunch was served in the suite; Nebel had eggs and bacon because it was his breakfast. They discussed his possible move to WNBC. Specific terms of a contract were not brought up.

Schwarz ended that first meeting by suggesting they get together again in a few weeks for more detailed discussions. They did—again at the New Weston—and this time, things got down to the nitty-gritty.

"Money was no problem," says Schwarz. "How could it be? He was being paid nothing at WOR. The hang-up in the talks had to do with freedom on the air."

Schwarz candidly told Nebel that NBC's management was

afraid of him, particularly the lawyers. He told him all guests and program content would have to be cleared through a broadcasting standards office.

That was enough for Nebel. He thanked Schwarz for a pleasant lunch and walked out.

Three weeks later, Schwarz called Nebel directly. "How about talking, just the two of us?" he asked.

This time, it was evident that the clearance problems had been ironed out. Schwarz asked Nebel how much money he wanted to make the change. The figure Nebel asked for was considerably less than what WNBC was willing to pay. Still it was more than double what he'd been getting at WOR.

With the issues of money and freedom put away, they turned to other areas of negotiation. Nebel knew WNBC's reputation for changing formats almost every year. He didn't want to leave WOR for a situation that would fold on him. He wanted a firm, five-year contract. Schwarz said he wasn't authorized to give it to him, but he would try to convince higher management to accept the five-year proposal.

The other area of debate concerned office space. Everyone close to Nebel knows how important this is to him. Perhaps all those years on the street enhanced his image of what an office represented. If he were to go to WNBC, he had to have written in the contract the size and shape of his office (none of the other talent at the station even had an office). There wasn't an office big enough at WNBC to satisfy his request. It was settled when WNBC agreed to have an office built for him.

WNBC gave Nebel a letter of intent, stating salary, contract length, and other general conditions. Schwarz asked that he not show the letter to anyone. Many people use letters-of-intent to enhance their positions with their present employers. Nebel promised he wouldn't.

He did, however, make an appointment with Bob Smith, WOR's programming chief, Smith broke the appointment. Nebel tried to make another, but was always put off by Smith's secretary. Finally, on the day the letter-of-intent was to run out, he insisted he see Smith. He was granted fifteen minutes.

"I've been offered another job," Nebel told Smith.

Smith's reaction, according to Nebel, was that of a man who'd

just been told a bakery was holding a donut sale in Des Moines, Iowa.

"It's a good one," Nebel continued. "But I'd like to stay here." Smith listened to what Nebel had to say. "If you'd pay me eighty-five dollars a week more, I'll stay."

Smith stood up. "No, John. Take the other job."

"He never even shook my hand," Nebel says. "He never wished me good luck or best wishes or anything. I walked over to WNBC and told them I was theirs."

Schwarz, in his search for top talk talent, had also approached Jean Shepherd. Bringing Shepherd and Nebel over together would have been a major New York broadcasting coup. Shepherd balked. He didn't want to be on the air four hours a night. He didn't want to talk to callers. And he didn't want Nebel to leave WOR.

In retrospect, both men's decisions were sound. Shepherd continues to delight listeners on WOR, whereas Nebel has had eight years of success at WNBC. At the time, however, Nebel was frightened of the move. He remembered going to the library before taking his first radio job at WOR, and looking through the *NBC Announcer's Handbook*. It was the Bible for radio announcers. NBC announcers spoke perfect English in big, round, sonorous tones. Entering into this world of the network brought back all Nebel's initial fears of broadcasting.

WOR fired Nebel five weeks before his contract was up, although it was contractually obligated to pay him. WNBC couldn't put him on the air for those five weeks, and was contractually forbidden from doing anything to publicize his move. Nebel sat out those five weeks in a state of high anticipation and gnawing fear.

His welcome to WNBC took the edge off his apprehensions. He was treated like a liberator. Everyone was polite and courteous. His wishes were respected. There was always someone to help with a problem or to add a nicety to an already pleasant and generous welcome. He started to feel at home.

"Actually, everybody was scared of him," says Jim Grau, now president of Peter Max Television, then the director of advertising and promotion for WNBC. Grau had held similar positions with WABC and WNEW in New York, and was considered one of

the industry's hottest promoters. In fact, that's what Nebel said to him when they were first introduced in August 1963.

"Big Wilson says you're the smartest advertising man in the business," Nebel said. "How would you like to be on the show tonight? It's for hotshots like you. It's on the book, *If You Haven't Made It by Thirty, You're Dead.*"

When Nebel began broadcasting on WNBC, it was losing almost a million dollars a year. Ted Walworth, vice-president and general manager of WNBC-AM, -FM, and -TV was committed to boosting the radio station's share of the New York market. He'd been the one to actually negotiate Nebel's contract through Schwarz, and he had hired Grau away from WNEW as part of his overall scheme.

Plans to promote Nebel's switch to WNBC had already been formulated when Grau arrived. They were prepared by Larry Grossman, who now heads his own advertising agency in New York. Jack Davis one of the prominent artists featured in *Mad Magazine*, was hired to do caricatures of all the station's personalities. The slogan attached to Nebel was He'd Rather Switch AND Fight. When the campaign was over, NBC had spent \$125,000 to tell New Yorkers where they could now hear Long John. There were bus and subway cards, full-page ads in the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and many suburban newspapers. Cocktail parties were hosted by WNBC around town to interest radio and TV columnists in covering Nebel's change of stations.

"He always called me 'Doctor,'" recalls Grau. "He was always at the station. I have no idea when he slept."

The campaign to introduce WNBC's personalities to New York was an unqualified success. Nebel, according to Grau, was the station's "superstar." The promotion revolved around him, and he was the subject of many feature stories published by newspapers and magazines.

The parties hosted by WNBC ran the gamut from cruises up the Hudson River for advertising executives and their wives, to sleek cocktail bashes at New York discotheques. Grau expected some trouble getting Nebel to attend because of his hours. It never happened. Nebel always showed up with a smile and

some good words for those in attendance. What Grau didn't know, however, was that inside, Nebel was dying.

"He hated those parties," says Big Wilson. "Of course, we all did, but you always go along because it's for the good of the station. That means it's for your good, too. What bothered John, I think, was his shyness. There he was, one of New York's most popular names, churning inside because he had to get up and say a few words. People just don't realize how shy John really is."

Shy or not, the publicity and advertising campaign was working. The station began to rise in the important Pulse Ratings. In the New York market, it went from twelfth to fifth, with Nebel's show constantly placing first or second. His new afternoon show on Saturdays looked like a winner, and an early evening show called the "Versus Show," in which he took on one guest head-to-head for an hour, was ranked second in its time period.

It was a grand welcome for Nebel to WNBC. Grau and his staff had pulled out all the stops, which not only got the Nebel show off to a fast start, but helped him feel wanted and at home.

Earl Wilson, the nation's most influential show-business columnist, recalls one of the WNBC parties welcoming Nebel to the station. Since Nebel was known as a night owl, Grau decided to have a drawing at the party for a door prize, which was an owl he'd purchased from a pet shop in Greenwich Village for seventy-five dollars. Wilson won the owl. He dropped it off with his doorman, and continued his night-time rounds, meeting up with his wife, Rosemary, at a nightclub opening. She went home to their apartment earlier than her husband, who had other entertainment events to cover. When she walked into their living room and saw the owl's two shiny eyes blazing at her in the darkness, she almost fainted. Grau's office received a phone call from Wilson at eight the next morning.

"Come over here and get that goddamned owl out of here," he said. "It's smelling up the whole place, and my wife damn near died last night," Grau returned the owl to the pet shop, and buried the seventy-five dollars in his expense account.

Nebel doesn't remember many of the parties in his honor. But he does remember one, which was held at the elegant Four Seasons Restaurant. After the party, he invited a dozen of his close friends (Lottman, Teller, etc.) to stay and join him for dinner.

When dinner was over, Nebel asked the captain for the bill.

"It's all been taken care of, Sir," the captain said.

"Who took care of it?" Nebel asked. The Captain pointed through a doorway at Robert Kintner, who was leaving with a few friends.

"Imagine, Robert Kintner buying me and a dozen friends dinner at the Four Seasons!" Nebel says.

He undoubtedly would have felt better had it been the other way around.

14

*"They deliberately fucked up his career." **

In terms of sustained broadcasting impact, Nebel's years with WNBC were his strongest. His experience at WOR had sharpened his interview techniques to perfection. He was at the peak of his confidence, and the shows reflected it.

"He loved to work," says Bill Schwarz, Nebel's boss at WNBC. "At least once a month he came in and asked me for more air time. He would have done eighteen hours a day if I let him."

Schwarz eventually did allow Nebel to expand his broadcasting time. He began the "Versus Show," from eight until nine in the evening. This was Nebel going head-to-head with a controversial guest. He also did a show on Saturday afternoons, and eventually started an hour-and-a-half show on Saturday nights. He refused to sign a contract for these new shows, preferring to do them on a handshake basis. His income tripled during the years of additional air time and his audience increased. It is significant that the "Versus Show," broadcast during television's prime viewing hours, made a substantial impact on the station's ratings. It was mandatory listening for many people, as Nebel

* WNBC radio personality

went at the guests tooth and nail. He was at his nastiest—and his best. Schwarz considers it his finest hour on the air.

"The 'Versus Show' got off to a slow start," claims Ken Knigin. "John was busy as hell with the all-night show, and didn't always have time to adequately prepare himself, especially when the subject matter was complex. That's why we started working Sunday afternoons."

The Sunday afternoon schedule came about when Knigin suggested they pre-interview "Versus Show" guests. Using skills developed in the courtroom, he telephoned guests who were booked for the coming week and grilled them over the phone. It worked. Nebel went on the air each night armed for bear.

It is impossible for the host of as many shows as Nebel has hosted, to prepare himself totally for each guest. The reading time involved is alone prohibitive. Fortunately, Nebel's inborn instinct for getting at the crux of a subject carries him through. In this writer's opinion, there is no one on the air who can more quickly and accurately discover the weakness in an argument, the hole in a story, the vulnerable soft underbelly of a position. Statistics crumble before him. Statements of fact become sophomoric mutterings under his scrutiny. Listening closely to Long John Nebel toying with a guest is to hear an interviewing genius at work. Often, a guest who has made a questionable statement doesn't realize Nebel is about to jump in for the kill. Nebel's question takes a long, devious route. He compliments the guest. He talks of his own experiences. He laughs. He feigns ignorance, making sure the guest realizes he enjoys only an eighth-grade education. Just when the guest has relaxed, the knife is thrown.

He is also the master of the unexpected. Harriet Blacker Algrant, publicity director for Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, often has mixed feelings about sending authors to the show. She's especially careful in the promotional material she sends Nebel, because he will often ignore the book and base his opening questions on a statement in the press release. Some authors, she says, refuse to subject themselves to Nebel's brand of interview. Others ask to do his show before doing any other. Either way, Mrs. Algrant considers the show a major mover of books.

Nebel's personal life was not as solid as his professional standing. The breach between him and Charlotte grew wider and

wider. He often appeared at WNBC in a state of anxiety. Once he broke down in Bill Schwarz's office and told him his marriage to Charlotte was about to end. Schwarz never knew that Nebel and Charlotte were not legally married. After they did separate, Nebel often moaned about the alimony he was paying. He wasn't lying. He continued to support her, although he had no legal obligation to do so.

Nebel's financial thinking is unorthodox. He is generous to a fault, tightfisted in the extreme, depending on the circumstance. When his daughter Jackie was in her teens, she asked him for a weekly allowance. He refused, but only after talks with Lottman, Knigin, and Teller.

Lottman recalls: "John was sincerely concerned that if he *gave* Jackie money, he'd warp her sense of values. He believed that you should work to earn money, and was convinced an allowance would develop negative qualities in her."

Nebel solved the problem by giving Jackie a job. She came once a week and cleaned the apartment for him. Lillian didn't like it, but her protests were ineffective. It didn't matter because Jackie worked only one day at her cleaning job.

WNBC's lawyers left Nebel alone for the most part, thus giving him a freer hand than he'd had at WOR. A program he taped with American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell didn't hit the air because Nebel's own lawyers feared libel suits. Those who heard the tapes say it was a gem. On a Sunday, at midnight, Rockwell, who was under indictment in New York, was brought to the studios from New Jersey in a limousine. The car had curtains; the studio had also been draped to keep people from looking in during the taping.

Although WNBC's lawyers adopted a hands-off policy toward the shows, they did scrutinize other aspects of Nebel's operation. One had to do with the food sent to the studio every night by the Carnegie Delicatessen. This arrangement had been originally made when Nebel was at WOR, the food was sent up in return for plugs on the show. At WNBC, however, payment for the food had to be in the form of scheduled commercials, and the lawyers decided that the amount of food being delivered didn't equal the value of Nebel's commercials. Carnegie therefore increased its nightly delivery until there was enough food in the control

room to feed the listening audience. Carnegie didn't mind, but Nebel eventually decided to stop the practice. By this time, Nathan's had also started delivering free hot dogs, potato salad, and other snacks to the studio. They continued to do so after Carnegie was dropped, but this was eventually stopped also during a management change.

"All that food at the studio every night was responsible for my gaining this weight," says Gene Frisch, a rotund NBC-TV engineer. "I'd quit smoking, and used to drop down between TV shows, and chat with John and the panelists. The pounds went on."

Frisch has been in on many of the pranks played on Nebel panelists, and Al Lottman has been the butt of many of them. Because Lottman often expressed concern about how many people would attend his funeral, Nebel decided to hold a practice memorial service. He and Sandy Teller talked one night on the air about the event, which, they said, was to be held at midnight at the Roxy Theatre. Listeners were told to go to the stage door on Fifty-first Street. Nebel and Teller assumed everyone would know it was a joke because the Roxy had been torn down years before. But fifty people showed up that night. They came into a restaurant, the Tin Lizzie, which occupies the site on which the Roxy stage door was formerly located. Shelly Fireman of the restaurant called Teller and told him of the turnout, most of whom stayed for dinner to Fireman's delight.

Nebel continued to cater to Charlotte. He washed, bleached, and set her hair in between dates with her regular hairdresser. His friends were often called in to help. Kay Armen, the singer, received a call from Nebel one Saturday afternoon. Charlotte was coming home from a brief stay in the hospital, and Nebel wanted new drapes on the apartment windows to surprise her. He had bought material and tried unsuccessfully to sew them himself. Would Kay come over and make the drapes? She arrived in slacks and a sweat shirt, toting her own sewing machine. In two hours the drapes were hung, with Gene Frisch's help. Charlotte had been complaining because they didn't have drapes. Now they had them.

"She's really killing him," panelists often said to each other as

Nebel went racing home from the show to deliver a steak sandwich on French bread.

Jackie remembers one evening when she went to a restaurant with her father and Charlotte.

"I feel so weak," Charlotte said when her steak was served. Nebel cut her meat into small pieces.

Nebel took Charlotte to openings in town. "This is my wife, Mrs. Nebel," he'd say when he introduced her. To test its pulling power, he occasionally did his show as a remote from the Brass Rail on Broadway. There was a full house every time he appeared.

"Who's that lady?" people asked.

"That's Mrs. Nebel."

Mrs. Nebel did less and less; John Nebel indulged her more and more. She complained about their life. She ate too many chocolate candies and got fat. Nebel kept bringing her boxes of chocolate candy. And along came Terry Garrity.

Joan Theresa ("Terry") Garrity came to New York in 1960 from her hometown, Kansas City, Missouri, after graduating from Kansas City University with a degree in speech and journalism. She journeyed to New York in search of a career in the theater. Instead, she became a book publicist for Lyle Stuart.

The first time she met John Nebel was when she brought an author to the show sometime in 1967. "I'm a night owl, so I would tune him in—he was the best thing on the air. I also loved Jean Shepherd. I'd seen photographs of Shepherd, and just assumed John looked the same. I was surprised to meet this tall slender man, very dapper, quite dashing, beautifully tailored."

Their relationship was professional during the first year. Nebel's life with Charlotte had disintegrated into an arrangement—he had the bedroom, she had the living room. They spoke only when absolutely necessary.

"Terry Garrity was a complete professional," says Anne Lombardo. "She was one of the few publicists who came with the author, stayed through the entire show, and saw that her client got a cab when it was over."

One morning at six, when the show was over and everyone had left, Nebel and Terry lingered in the studio. They ate cold pastrami sandwiches left over from Carnegie's delivery, and talked for two hours about their private lives.

"John, why don't you call me some time and we can have dinner," Terry suggested. "I have an expense account."

"No, my dear, I could never take a woman to dinner unless I could pay."

"Well, one way or the other, give me a call."

This conversation occurred in November. The following January 1968, on a Sunday night, Nebel sat in his office at WNBC. He picked up the phone and called Terry's home number.

"I thought you might like dinner," he said.

She couldn't accept his invitation. She had a visitor, who happened to be a former Nebel producer with whom Terry had become good friends.

Nebel went to dinner alone at the Empress Restaurant, which was owned by a friend, George Seto, now owner of Ho Ho. He ordered two dinners to take out, and dropped them off at Terry's apartment on his way back to the studio.

Terry left Lyle Stuart about this time and went to work as a publicist for Simon and Schuster, the book publishers. Her office was in Rockefeller Center, where WNBC was located.

She called Nebel one afternoon and invited him to take her to dinner. She suggested they go to Louise's.

"I've found a wonderful new restaurant," Nebel replied. "We'll go there."

"I'd like to eat where you always eat, John. I'd enjoy that."

Nebel agreed to eat at Louise's. Afterwards, Terry invited him to have coffee at her apartment, but he declined, dropped her off, and went to the studio.

She called him a week later and said she had theater tickets for Saturday night. Would he go with her? No—but he would enjoy an evening at the Royal Box in the Americana Hotel.

After that night, they began seeing each other regularly, mostly for dinner. Terry was surprised that he never made a pass at her, never suggested they go to bed.

Eventually, they did begin a sexual relationship or, as Nebel

always says about such situations, they "began exchanging philosophical viewpoints."

"We had a very rocky time because John had a terrible battle with himself about sex," says Terry, "and I had fought so hard to get a good healthy attitude. I couldn't go his way. John couldn't stand to have sex discussed. He would be fine on the air just talking about what everyone else did, but for himself and a woman to discuss their own sexual problems, it took him a long time to come around. When he did come around, it was a whole new world for him and it was wonderful for him."

Their affair, which lasted only from January through June 1968, was intense and complex. Terry worked all day. Nebel worked all night. Their only real time together was on weekends. They never lived together. Nebel went home every night to the apartment where he was still living with Charlotte.

"I told John I thought he should leave her," says Terry. "It seemed ridiculous to live with a woman under their circumstances. But he wouldn't."

As the affair progressed, they had long talks about their relationship and its future. Terry declared her desire to marry Nebel. He refused, and she became despondent. Lyle Stuart was playing Cupid all this time, calling Nebel and encouraging him to marry Terry, calling Terry and urging her on.

One spring night, as they walked together after having had dinner with author Jackie Susann and her husband Irving Mansfield, Nebel stopped at a corner and turned to her.

"All right, we'll get married," he said.

By this time, however, Terry had had second thoughts about marrying Nebel and about marriage in general. She didn't accept his offhand proposal.

Their affair continued. It had its rituals. Every morning, when he left the WNBC studios, Nebel delivered to her a pint of fresh-squeezed orange juice that had been included in the Carnegie Delicatessen food order. At first, Terry came to the door in her robe every morning and took the juice from him. She eventually gave him her apartment key, and he would silently enter, put the juice in the refrigerator, and leave.

"John became more and more possessive," says Terry. "He wanted me there whenever he was ready to talk. I couldn't keep up the pace. I never slept. I was working all day and spending the evenings with him. He liked me to stay around for the show, and I did on many nights."

In April 1968, Terry left Simon and Schuster to set up her own book publicity business. Nebel loaned her a few hundred dollars. The venture was, by her own admission, a flop. She was a good publicist but an inexperienced businesswoman. She charged too little, and gave too much service to clients. Nebel counseled her, but she was unable to change.

One thing Terry could never understand was Nebel's approach to money. She acknowledges that he is one of the most generous men she's ever known. Yet there were areas of money that caused frequent altercations between them. "He was very concerned with small money matters," Terry claims. "He'd give me some money, and if the change wasn't correct, he'd ask me what I'd done with it. But big money meant nothing to him."

In June 1968, Terry's largest client, a major publishing house, asked her to attend the American Booksellers Association's convention in Washington, D.C. Nebel was angry that she was going. He realized she should go because of her business obligations, but he personally tried to dissuade her. She went, leaving an angry John Nebel in New York.

"I'm sure John had visions of my running around with a zillion men," Terry reflects. "In truth, I sat in that hotel room and wrote down the pros and cons of our relationship. The list of negatives got longer and longer. The things on the good side were indeed good, but for the first time I faced the fact that I had to go back and break it off."

It took a few days before Nebel's anger subsided sufficiently for them to have dinner and talk. Terry told him how she felt. She mentioned the lists and itemized their contents. Nebel listened patiently.

"I agree with you, Terry. I agree with everything you've said."

Terry went home that night much relieved. She'd expected an outburst from him. Instead, she'd received understanding and love.

To her surprise, Nebel called her the next day. He suggested

dinner. Terry accepted. They dined pleasantly, with Nebel telling childhood stories and tales of the early WOR shows.

"He never mentioned what we'd talked about the night before," Terry says. "It was as if it had never happened."

For three weeks, they had dinner under the same circumstances. Nebel ignored Terry's decision. Each time she brought it up, he smiled and told her he understood.

"I finally had to do something dramatic," she says. "I packed a bag one night and took off. I didn't tell anyone where I was going. First I stayed a few days with a girl friend in New Jersey. Then I came back to Manhattan and stayed with another girl friend. I stayed away for two weeks."

Those two weeks found Nebel in a state of agitation. His calls to Terry's apartment went unanswered. He called her friends; they didn't know where she was. She had asked for, and received, her apartment key from him when she returned from Washington. But he had to get into her place. Maybe she was sick or dead. Maybe she left him a note.

He went to the apartment with his director, Howard Bayha. On the way, he did an unusual thing for an atheist. He walked into St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue and stood in front of the altar for a few moments.

The superintendent of Terry's apartment knew Nebel from his frequent visits. So when Nebel made a display of the fact that he'd forgotten the key, the super let him in.

There was no note. Terry had simply disappeared. Nebel left his own note. He wrote it in lipstick on a napkin. "I love you," it said.

That night was tough on Nebel. He sat alone in his office and allowed depression, never far from him, to capture and suck him into its vortex. Anne Lombardo was concerned over his condition. Sandy Teller arrived. He, too, became worried, and called Al Lottman. Someone called Hanna and Milton Kapit; they were there within minutes. Some thought he'd been drinking, although it's unlikely—and Nebel denies it. The swing of Long John's emotional pendulum is so wide and exerts such a frightening force that he can be rendered helpless. No, *almost* helpless. There has always been one thing that could cushion the pendulum and slow it down. That was his show.

"I was sure he couldn't do the show that night," Hanna Kapit says. Teller was ready to go on if Nebel was unable to; but it wasn't necessary. He was in front of the microphone when the red light came on, and rolled through a lively discussion on finance with Adam Smith.

"I tried to get John and Terry back together," Lyle Stuart says. "But it wasn't to be."

John Nebel and Terry Garrity had only brief conversations after that night. She continued sending authors to appear on the show, and Nebel always gave special preference to her requests. When *The Sensuous Woman* was published in 1970, Nebel received an advance copy from Terry. He was shocked at the explicit sexual details in the book, and annoyed that Terry had painted herself as an unattractive woman who'd overcome her shortcomings through the creative, uninhibited use of sex. Most of all, he was amused and secretly flattered that one of the four sets of initials to whom she dedicated the book was J. N. He also had to smile when reading a chapter which dealt with her affair with a famous "television" broadcaster. It was, without question, John Nebel.

Lyle Stuart published *The Sensuous Woman*. It is one of the biggest selling books in publishing history. And although Nebel refused Stuart's request to have Terry on as a guest, he plugged the book, usually humorously, for months, and undoubtedly played a large part in enabling Terry Garrity to enjoy an early retirement to Florida. She's made the proverbial million, and continues to earn money from the book. She now leads a quiet life, is writing a children's book, and has braces on her teeth, paid for by *The Sensuous Woman*.

"I learned so much from John Nebel," she told me. "It wouldn't have worked between us. I know that. But I still love him. He was a wonderful chapter in my life—and my book."

The next chapter in Nebel's romantic life was waiting in the wings, a beautiful, poised, and bright young girl. She'd been introduced to Nebel by her father and quickly developed a crush on the older man. When her father died, Nebel and Terry Garrity spent considerable time helping her adjust to the loss.

"I knew she was in love with John," comments Terry. "John's

role was that of a father to her, but it eventually turned into a romance."

Nebel's almost five-year relationship with the young girl cannot be detailed because of her reluctance to approve its inclusion in this book (although she readily agreed to be interviewed, and spent five hours relating into a tape recorder every aspect of their liaison). Suffice it to say that their affair, during which they lived together as man and wife and billed themselves as such around town, was a stormy one. Most of Nebel's close friends advised him to end it for his own emotional and physical well-being. He eventually came to this conclusion himself, and over a year's time allowed matters to drift into a natural separation. It wasn't easy. The timing was bad, coming in the midst of professional problems and health uncertainties. Still, it was done, and as is most always the case, all the involved parties survived.

The show and the fraternity of panelists rolled along together in high gear during Nebel's early years at WNBC. He added a new wrinkle to his preshow brainwashing of the guests, as Judge Bentley Kassal, who was then New York State chairman of the Americans for Democratic Action, learned when he appeared as a guest on the "Versus Show":

"I went to the show confident and relaxed," Kassal says. "I'd been an assemblyman, and considered myself a good, cool debater. I arrived fifteen minutes early and was seated in the studio by Nebel's producer. A few minutes before air time, a gaunt, tall guy in sport clothes came in and adjusted the microphones. He flipped some switches, rearranged some wires, and left. Naturally, I thought he was an engineer. He hadn't even looked at me. Then he walked back in, sat down, the red light came on, and he fired a question at me about the ADA's stand on a negative income tax. There was no introduction, no welcome, just that question, asked with a snarl. I knew the subject, but was caught off-guard. I answered as best as I could, and then asked him a question. He really tore into me. It was his show, he said, and *he'd* ask the questions. I never recovered. I was off-balance for the entire hour, defensive, weak. I came back a month later and we've been friends ever since."

At WNBC the type of guest on the show changed. Gone were the visitors from outer space. Replacing them were the advocates

of ESP, astrology, palm reading, and numerology. Nebel also did a few political shows, even though he is not interested in politics. He avoided shows on so-called sociologically important subjects, unless urged to do them by management. However, it is Nebel's prerogative to choose the topics that are to be discussed on the show. Anne Lombardo suggests some, but Nebel makes the final decision. There are certain subject areas in which he is interested, and the shows reflect this personal involvement.

"John's shows are a personal search for answers to questions he's been asking himself for years," says David Cole Gordon. "It's a public, open forum from which John has gained an education unavailable to most other men."

Barry Farber believes that some of his own success on WOR can be credited to Nebel's personalized choice of topics on the Long John show. In particular, he cites the Six-Day War in the Middle East as a turning point in his program.

"I started riding with the war on June 6, 1967," says Farber, "and I rode with it for five straight days. I was amazed to discover that John not only didn't devote much time to it, he completely ignored it. I think I gained a lot of listeners during that period, particularly when you realize we're broadcasting in New York where there is a heavy Jewish population."

Nebel began to regenerate his interest in music. More and more shows revolved around music, particularly big bands and jazz. Sy Oliver, whose arrangements spearheaded the success of the Jimmy Lunceford and Tommy Dorsey orchestras, began appearing as a regular guest. Sy had formed his own band in May of 1970 and was looking for publicity. He was suggested to Nebel as a guest.

"I don't want him," Nebel said. "He's too hard to handle." Nebel was persuaded to have Oliver on, and discovered him to be pleasant, and totally cooperative. Public reputations, as Nebel well knows, seldom reflect the truth. Oliver, and his wife Lil, who was one of the original Clark Sisters and who still performs regularly as a soloist, have become two of Nebel's closest friends. Oliver openly credits Nebel with putting him and the band in business again through the constant exposure on the show.

WNBC continued to go through changes. Ken Fairchild was

brought in to establish an all-telephone talk format. He was introduced to Nebel.

"You're from Houston?" Nebel asked.

"Yes."

"I hope you bought a round-trip ticket."

When Fairchild left to go back to Houston, Nebel offered to buy his return ticket.

"Nebel was such an enigma," says Fairchild. "He didn't socialize much at the station, although he was friendly whenever you bumped into him in the hall. He never bought you a cup of coffee, but all of a sudden he was taking you to Louise's and springing for a fifty-dollar tab. It was typical of him not to show up at my going-away party. It was a lunch affair at the Cattleman, and when I came back to the station I bumped into John in the hall. He shook my hand, wished me luck, and handed me an expensive Swiss watch that I still wear. No parties and back-slapping for Nebel. He thought about you, and spent money for a gift. He was a delight to work with."

Program managers came and went at WNBC. One new addition to the staff was Pat Whitley, who came from WWDC in Washington, D.C. to replace Bill Schwarz as WNBC's program manager. Whitley brought with him a programming philosophy that appealed to higher management—he was going after the younger audience, the eighteen to thirty-four group that was being pointed to as the nation's biggest retail buyers. John Nebel did not, quite simply, fit into Whitley's programming plans.

"Young radio listeners aren't talk-oriented," says Whitley. "It's music and personality disc jockeys that capture them."

There had to be *some* talk on WNBC, however. Its license with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) stipulated that a portion of its daily programming had to be given over to talk "in the public interest." Nebel's brand of talk was not, in Whitley's mind, calculated to best serve that interest. More importantly, he felt the loose, rambling Nebel style was not hard-hitting enough; the opening, he said, should be like a newspaper headline—strong enough to grab a listener. Nebel often started shows in a casual, roundabout manner. It was his style, his approach. Whitley didn't like it.

There are few businesses as insecure as broadcasting. With each new program manager comes change, even if the change is for the worse. A new man has to do *something*. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Like Schwarz, who had used Nebel as the pivot around which a new format swung, Whitley brought in Don Imus from Cleveland as the cornerstone for his changes. Trying to describe Imus is a waste of time. He had attended a disc jockey school in Los Angeles before working in Cleveland. It was at that school that he first became aware of Nebel. Long John Nebel was a course there.

Don Imus is brash, rude, wild, wacky, and irreverent on the air—just the right kind of personality to take New York by storm. He was hired as WNBC's morning man, and within weeks had become the subject of commuter dialogue and cocktail-party debate. Dressed in red, white, and blue overalls, he carried the present day's newfound social freedoms into the conservative studios of WNBC. Sex, politics, religion—it's all fair game for "Imus-in-the-Morning."

With Imus established as the station's lead-off batter, Whitley began making changes to enhance his new star's position in the schedule. There is a programming theory concerning the lead-in to shows: radio listeners, unlike TV viewers, turn *away from* shows, not *to* them. They like consistency, according to the theory. An Imus listener will keep his dial tuned to WNBC as long as the program preceding his is not vastly different. As far as Whitley was concerned, Nebel listeners would not set their clock radios to wake up to Imus.

"John," Whitley told Nebel one afternoon, "now that Brad [Crandall] is gone, we have the eight to midnight spot to fill. How would you like it?"

Nebel said he'd think about it. He had dinner with Ken Fairchild, who had returned from Houston to direct programming at WMCA, and told him of Whitley's proposal. Incredibly, Nebel thought Whitley wanted him to do *both* shows—his own at midnight and Crandall's at eight. Fairchild counseled Nebel against so much air time. No one could be effective that many hours on the air every day.

When Nebel found out that Whitley wanted to switch him to the earlier time slot, he was devastated. He'd been doing a mid-

night show ever since he started in radio sixteen years ago. He was the best. Midnight meant Nebel.

"We've got to boost that eight to midnight time, John," Whitley said.

Fairchild agrees that had he been in the same position as Whitley he probably would have considered the change, too. After all, Nebel had big pulling power. By having Nebel, with his big audience, on from eight to midnight, sagging ratings could be boosted.

The lead-in theory, however, was a greater consideration in management's mind. They wanted music to lead into Imus, and they got it by hiring a disc jockey from St. Louis named Bill Hopkins.

I asked Don Imus how he felt about having music as opposed to Nebel's talk show, leading into him.

"What lead-in?" he replied, sounding as though I were calling to audition for his "School of One-Hundred-and-One Show Business Careers." He went on. "What do I get with a mediocre music show? Ten thousand listeners? With Nebel I'd get a couple of hundred thousand."

No matter. Management's mind was made up. Hopkins would take Nebel's place at midnight. Nebel would go on at eight.

Nebel went into a tailspin of depression as he faced the change in hours that was scheduled to begin in January 1972. His reaction to the change was predictable, especially coming on top of what he termed, "the worst year I've ever experienced."

Nineteen seventy-one *had* been a rough one for Long John Nebel. Increasing squabbles with management took their toll. His romantic life was stormy, leading to a certain beaching of the current relationship. Most importantly, he learned in 1971 that he had cancer.

15

*"I know you want me to be honest, John." **

Dr. Robert Rowan is a mild-mannered, unassuming urologist connected with St. Vincent's Hospital in New York. He was in the middle of a meeting at the County Medical Society on the night of January 4, 1971, when a call came from Dr. Joseph Consentino, who was calling from Nebel's apartment. It was eight o'clock. Nebel was in severe pain. He was suffering urine retention. Could Rowan come?

Rowan had met Nebel when he was on WOR. Photographer Roy Schatt had an office next to Rowan's professional suite. They were talking one day about socialized medicine, and Schatt suggested Rowan discuss the subject on the Long John Nebel Show, where he was a regular panelist. Rowan went on the show and became Nebel's friend.

Rowan left the meeting and drove directly to Nebel's apartment. Pharmacist Alan Cornet was also there. He'd been called late in the afternoon by Dr. Howard Miller, who had prescribed some pain-killers for Nebel. Cornet was delivering the prescription.

* Dr. Robert Rowan, urologist

It was not a sudden attack of pain. Nebel had been feeling poorly for weeks, and had experienced some urine retention during that period. Some nights during the show, he had to excuse himself as many as twenty times to go to the men's room, only to discover he was incapable of producing more than a trickle of urine. Cornet, Consentino—everyone—had urged him to see Bob Rowan for an examination. Nebel had refused. He'd had a urological exam by Rowan once before and disliked the discomfort involved.

"John was in horrible pain," Cornet says. "Dr. Rowan told us on the phone not to give him any medication. He kept going from one corner of the apartment to the other, doubled over, moaning, crying. At one point I considered belting him to knock him out. Joe Consentino managed to calm him down a little before Rowan arrived."

After examining Nebel at the apartment, Rowan advised, "I think we'd better get you to the hospital.

Nebel balked. Couldn't Rowan do something to relieve the pain temporarily? He wanted to do the show. But Rowan was adamant, so Nebel had little choice. They got in Consentino's car and drove to Columbus Hospital, where Nebel was admitted. Anne Lombardo dragged out a tape for that evening's show.

Dr. Rowan conducted an exhaustive series of tests over the next few days. The tests themselves were difficult enough without the added complication of having Long John Nebel as a patient—and a friend.

John Nebel could easily drive a doctor to drink. He plays one against the other. He knows many medical men, and calls them, one by one, until he has succeeded in getting conflicting statements from them. Then, just as he does on radio, he uses the statements to challenge each doctor's judgment.

Because of his close friendship with his patient, Rowan decided that it would be better for another doctor to perform exploratory surgery. He therefore called in Dr. Thomas Sinatra, chief of urology at Columbus. Sinatra, after consulting with Rowan, postponed surgery a week until further tests could be completed and evaluated.

The tests indicated it was almost certain that Nebel had prostate cancer, and surgery was scheduled for Wednesday,

January 13. Rowan spent two sleepless nights trying to decide whether or not to tell Nebel what he and Sinatra suspected. To tell him would be to depress him. And since it was only through surgery that a positive diagnosis could be made, Rowan's inclination was to not mention the possibility of cancer beforehand. But he was dealing with John Nebel. He knew Nebel would lose faith in him if he didn't level with him. On Tuesday night Rowan went to the hospital to see Nebel. "I know you want me to be honest, John," he began.

Nebel nodded. He knew what Rowan was going to say. The telephone calls he'd been making to other doctors had made him aware of the high possibility of cancer. He was also suspicious because a great number of X-rays had been taken of his hip, where prostate cancer often spreads. The doctors had talked of making a small incision in the hip while he was under anesthesia. It all pointed to the worst.

Yet when Rowan told him that he thought he had cancer, Nebel went numb. No matter how much he'd mentally prepared himself for this verdict, Rowan's words were an assault. His first thought was to rip out the catheter that had been inserted to relieve his bladder and go out the window. He didn't decide *against* doing this, as he recalls; he was just too stunned to make any decision.

Rowan told him the prognosis for prostate cancer was good—in fact, in comparison with some other forms of cancer, it was very good. It is slow-growing, and men commonly live ten and fifteen years with it. Nebel countered this by saying he had spoken on the phone with a doctor friend, who had indicated that he, Nebel, wouldn't be around long enough to buy Christmas presents. Rowan, who was understandably angry that any doctor would make such an irresponsible telephone diagnosis, firmly told Nebel his chances for years of productive life were excellent.

Bob Rowan was in the operating room the next morning. So was Joe Consentino. They were joined by seven other doctors, all Nebel friends, whose presence there was an expression of encouragement. The operation is an extremely delicate procedure. No outside incision is made. Two tubes are inserted in the penis; one provides light and magnification, the other is the vehicle

for the long thin scalpel. The cutting must be done with great care. A slip could sever muscles controlling urination, leaving the patient unable to control himself.

Sinatra's surgery went smoothly. The cancer diagnosis was confirmed, and a biopsy on a piece of tissue taken from the hip indicated it had spread to the bone.

"I might as well pack it in," Nebel said to Rowan when he was later told of the findings.

"No, John," Rowan said. "I meant what I said last night. You can live with this for a long, long time. You've got to believe that."

Nebel's convalescence was a circus. Visitors packed the floor's waiting room. Over twelve thousand cards and letters came into WNBC from listeners. They were delivered nightly to Nebel at the hospital.

"He did the show for four nights during his hospitalization period," Anne Lombardo says. "He was brought to the studio from the hospital, bag and all, and returned when he went off the air."

There were, of course, moments of depression in the hospital. But none of them equalled the depths to which he sank when he returned to his apartment. The night he was to go back on the air full-time, it took four of his closest friends to convince him to leave the place and go to the studio.

Once his physical strength returned, Nebel's performance on the air was as strong as ever. Emotionally, he'd lost ground. His troubles had become a spiral that twisted in ever-decreasing circles. Pat Whitley and general manager Perry Bascomb were obviously looking for new directions in which to move the station. Nebel's friends could find few moments of laughter with him. His phone calls were dismal, filled with sighs. Sometimes he cried during a conversation, and had to excuse himself. No one listening to the show could ever detect his state of mind—he seemed like the same old Nebel. But when the show ended and he returned to his apartment, he slumped into the posture of a defeated, disinterested man.

"They're going to drop me," he said, referring to WNBC. "When my contract is up next August, it'll be the end."

Everyone tried to convince him he was wrong, but everyone

knew he was right. The shift to the early evening was just a preview of the changes being planned at the station. What it added up to for Nebel was the end of a life and a career. Cancer and rock 'n' roll would take care of both jobs.

16

*"The time has come," the Walrus said
To talk of many things. . . ."* *

When a circus is about to pack up and move to another town, the final performances are known as "blow-off" shows. Nebel's blow-off show for the all-night program was on December 30, 1972. It had been a typical Nebel Christmas, not existing because he willed it away.

"Jack never could bear Christmas," Lillian says. "I remember a day in Chicago when he broke down and cried as we walked through a department store. They were playing "Silent Night" over the PA system."

Lillian knew of his aversion to the Christmas season when they were courting. She warned her mother not to have any Christmas music playing when he visited because of its emotional effect on him.

"Christmas is a tough, brutal time for a lot of people," Nebel says. "That's why I don't play music on the show on Christmas eve. Lonely people can take a talk a lot easier."

Nebel wanted the blow-off show to be business-as-usual. He discouraged suggestions from panelists to have a farewell party

* Lewis Carroll

on the air. A number of show people wanted to stop by on that final evening, but Nebel insisted he wanted nothing special. "I want to do the show and get it over with."

His all-night shows during the final month were professional, slick, and uninspired. He seemed obsessed with the need to defend Pat Whitley and Perry Bascomb for their decision to switch him to an earlier time slot. "Mr. Whitley and Mr. Bascomb are fine gentlemen and highly professional broadcasters," Nebel said on the air too often. "I would prefer to continue with the all-night show, but their decision, I'm certain, is in the best interests of WNBC. I accept it as a challenge." The frequency with which he praised Whitley and Bascomb became a running joke.

Unknown to Nebel, a few of his panelists decided, some for the first time, to go against his wishes. They planned a party for blow-off night. Sandy Teller did most of the phoning. By show-time, more than a hundred people were scheduled to drop in to say good-bye to all-night radio's dethroned talk king. At first, he was annoyed by their appearance. But as they filed in throughout the night, he had to respond positively to the sentiment expressed by their actions. He couldn't help but reflect on his sixteen years of all-night broadcasting. Each face triggered memories of the highs and lows of an unusual and successful career around which a world of *people* orbited, swooping in close when his gravity pulled, drifting away when his galaxy became crowded. They appeared night after night over the sixteen years, educating him, making him laugh or cry, feeding his ego, chipping away at his paper-thin veneer of security, contributing to and taking from his life and *the* life he created for them.

As the studio filled with well-wishers, he was swamped with memories of

. . . bidding, in February of 1971, to buy the entire NBC Radio Network for sixty million dollars through a financial combine. It didn't work, but it made the front pages of broadcasting trade publications for weeks.

. . . standing by as a character witness for comedian and friend, Phil Foster, who had been mistakenly linked to underworld figures.

- . . . attending Sandy Teller's second marriage ceremony.
- . . . complimenting author Jackie Susann on her ring, which she took off and gave to him. He still wears it on his pinky.
- . . . laughing at the husband and wife comedy team of Stiller and Meara, who dropped in so many nights and turned the show into hysteria. They did the same thing on blow-off night.
- . . . selling over the air someone's \$125,000-home in Vermont. The man, a loyal listener, had bought five spots on the Nebel show at forty dollars each. The house was sold before the third spot was ever aired.
- . . . recording a record album with friend and arranger, Phil Moore. Nebel talked the words to favorite tunes over Moore's sensitive musical arrangements, which were performed by top jazz artists.
- . . . doing many shows with Dr. Carlton Fredericks, who pulled more mail than any other guest.
- . . . receiving a marriage proposal by telegram from a woman in New Haven.
- . . . handling suicide calls, and losing one—a woman—who killed herself after not being able to reach him.
- . . . giving a listener's son, Sheldon, an audition over the phone. Sheldon was a tap dancer and told bad jokes. It is the unanimous choice of all panelists as the funniest moment in the show's history.
- . . . encouraging forty panelists to attend the funeral of Al Lottman's mother. And seeing Al receive over two thousand letters and cards of sympathy from listeners after Nebel casually mentioned her death on the air.
- . . . devoting two shows a year to the reading of the best hate mail.
- . . . attacking the religious beliefs of Father Gomar DePaw, founder of the Catholic Traditionalist Movement, and then learning that DePaw led his congregation in prayer for him following his cancer surgery.
- . . . erupting at a lady listener who accused him of criticizing Lillian on the air, despite the fact that he made a ritual of complimenting Lillian on her raising of Jackie in his absence.
- . . . filming a television commercial for Jello. He bought five

identical yellow shirts to the studio in case he perspired, and then walked out in the middle of the filming because he didn't want to give anyone a chance to tell him he was no good (the director was actually pleased with his performance).

. . . discovering and touting Ralph Kaufmann's shoeshine parlor in Cleveland, and having five-dollar gift certificates made up for a "Kaufmann shine."

. . . laughing at comedy writer Jack Douglas' stories on the show, and filling up as Douglas' wife Reiko, sang "Yes, We Have No Bananas" in a minor key and without accompaniment.

. . . fuming at actress Veronica Lake's attitude during the first few minutes of the show. The interview ended when she asked if he wanted to match wits with her. "Did you bring yours with you?" Nebel retorted.

. . . hearing that Irving Berlin, when introduced to Jackie Susann, told her he knew her from the Nebel show, his nightly listening habit.

. . . having Billy Rose ask to be on the show, a coup in itself, and ending up with what Nebel considers the best show he's ever done.

. . . watching Helen Gurley Brown develop from a visiting author to one of publishing's most successful women.

. . . delighting his engineers at WNBC with constant teasing on the air and a commitment to never criticize them for a fluff, and shocking new engineer Harry Baker by blowing up over a mistake in a food delivery from a local pizza parlor.

. . . impressing director Frank DeVeau with his consistent professionalism.

. . . worrying receptionist Gwen Parsons by telling her the sesame seeds she was eating caused frigidity.

They all came for blow-off night. Food and champagne was provided by Gene Sanger. Al Lottman, who'd cancelled a trip to Montreal to be there, became annoyed when he found it almost impossible to break in on the conversation, and left early. Newsmen Jim Eyer and Morrison Kruz, the victims of many Nebel jokes, watched the end of a broadcasting era. Stiller and Meara were wildly funny. Jonathan Teller, aged four, charmed everyone in the studio.

The fun lasted until two in the morning. Then Nebel signaled that he'd had enough. In the voice that millions of night people had grown to depend upon for sixteen years, he said, "Let's get down to some business," and read a commercial.

17

*“Are you trying your best?” **

The early evening Nebel show was an exercise in frustration. He hated it. Station management increased its pressure on him to change the show's format. They wanted him to deal with what it considered socially significant subject matters—drugs, Vietnam, politics. He refused, which led to open confrontations. He was even more adamant when it came to defending his use of panelists. Whitley wanted Nebel to do the show alone. He agreed to use only one panelist each night, but quickly allowed the table to fill up again once the pressure was off.

Nebel knew it was impossible to succeed in the new time slot. That, and the pressures to change, all added to his insecurity. The shows were low-key, lethargic, often boring. He knew his contract, which was up on August thirteenth, would not be renewed.

Compounding his problems with the early show was a heavy schedule of sports broadcasts. WNBC has exclusive radio rights in New York to the Rangers' hockey games and the Knickerbockers' basketball games. Almost every night Nebel found him-

* WNBC program director Pat Whitley

self being preempted by Marv Albert's play-by-play of one or the other of the games. Albert, as good a sportscaster as Nebel is a talk-show host, knew what the games were doing to Nebel's show. "He used to kid me about it," says Albert, "but it was obvious he was very unhappy. When I first came to WNBC, John was always walking around, kidding, putting people on. Toward the end, he just went through the motions."

In early June 1972, *New York Post* radio-TV columnist Bob Williams, wrote: "In the talk-show contest for attention between 10:00 P.M. and midnight, Barry Gray is running far ahead of the pack on WMCA. Long John Nebel's lagging at No. 9 on WNBC, behind all sorts of competitive programming on WOR, WABC, WPAT, WRFM, among other outlets."

WNBC expressed its disappointment with Nebel's performance. Nebel pointed out it was impossible to build any audience with nightly preemptions by hockey and basketball. Whitley and Bascomb ignored this logic.

"Are you trying your best, John?" Whitley asked.

It was the most cutting thing anyone could have said to one of broadcasting's most dedicated professionals.

In mid-June, Nebel was told his contract would be dropped. He was allowed to resign, the resignation to become effective at the end of Nebel's contract in August.

The June 16 issue of *Daily Variety* carried the headline, Cancer Victim Nebel Bowing Off Radio Show. When Nebel saw it, all the panic, fear, and frustrations of the past year delivered its cumulative punch. He broke down in his office, the clipping clutched in his hand. It was not the cancer, he kept repeating. But other stations would believe it was, and not take a chance on him.

Abel Green, the editor of *Variety*, and Nebel's close friend, saw to it that the weekly *Variety* carried a softened portrayal of Nebel's exit from WNBC. That story ran on June 21: Long John Nebel Calling It Quits at WNBC Radio; Misses old Midnite Slot.

A tribute to Nebel was held on July 20. It was put together by an old friend and admirer, Candy Jones. When she heard of *Variety's* cancer headline, she decided Long John would benefit

from a gathering of his friends in a tribute to him. She called them and announced the planned event as a "Hello-a-Thon" to Long John. When the invited guests arrived, they were greeted by girls from Candy's modeling and charm school, who wore large signs directing them to the appropriate studio at WNBC.

Nebel's first inkling that something special was occurring was when he saw Barry Gray of WMCA and John Wingate of WOR walking down the hall on the second floor of the RCA Building. Nebel's first thought was that WNBC's management was talking with them about replacing him. He was almost speechless with surprise when he was then told the real purpose of their visit.

As the evening progressed, Gray and Wingate were joined by a host of Nebel's friends and by the elite of New York radio, all of whom used the occasion to publicly declare what he meant to them and to radio. It was a touching evening, perhaps too touching. Nebel became very depressed and had to vacate the studio many times when the emotional accolades overwhelmed him. Once, as he sat in the control room watching some of the visitors do the show, he looked down to see Candy Jones sitting on the floor. She knew her Hello-a-Thon had backfired, and instead of cheering him, had only worsened his depression. She got up and left. Nebel almost went after her. He wanted to tell her he loved her.

By early August, broadcasting deals for Nebel began to appear—and disappear. In some cases, the potential employers admitted fears about his health. It takes a station at least a year to successfully build a new show. Would Nebel last long enough to make the initial promotion worthwhile? Some doubted it.

Comedian Dayton Allen suggested he and Nebel put together a cabaret act.

A nonprofit organization in the health field offered Nebel five-minute, public-service interview shows, to be taped and supplied to stations at no charge in return for publicity for the organization. Nebel took it; the date of his resignation from WNBC was drawing close, and he had nothing else lined up. The money involved was at least enough to pay his cleaning bills.

Everyone in the Nebel fraternity tried to come up with an answer. There wasn't one. New York radio was almost exclusively music programming. There were only two possibilities—WMCA,

which had recently gone to a talk format; and WOR, Nebel's original employer. WOR was happy with Barry Farber's all-night show. There was nothing there for Nebel.

Ken Fairchild was interested in having Nebel join his station's roster of talk personalities. WMCA had instituted what it termed "Dial-a-Log Radio," in which the format was exclusively two-way phone conversations between the air personality and his listeners. Fairchild was the morning man. Bob Grant, a caustic, acrimonious talk-show host from Los Angeles, was brought in to handle calls from nine o'clock until one. Other talkers handled the phones through the late afternoon and early evening until Barry Gray's familiar voice opened his interview show at ten. At midnight, New York's only black talk-show host, Leon Lewis, came on, and talked to listeners in a gentle, intelligent manner. Lewis was popular; his ratings were good. Nebel was convinced that Peter Straus, WMCA's owner, would never consider replacing Lewis. His feelings were reinforced when the trade papers announced that Lewis had been signed to another three-year contract.

Still, Fairchild called Nebel, and they talked. The all-night situation at WMCA was not as pat as Nebel had been led to believe. Despite Lewis' popularity, revenue from the midnight-to-dawn show was not sufficient to sustain it. Straus was considering going off the air after Gray and coming on again with Fairchild, leaving the all-night slot silent.

"We couldn't pay you," Fairchild told Nebel. "But maybe we could work out something on a profit-sharing basis."

Other talk show personalities have worked under this kind of an arrangement for years: no salary, but fifty percent of all advertising revenues generated on the show. It can be a very lucrative arrangement.

Nebel was afraid of such a financial deal. He didn't know whether his sponsors would follow him over to WMCA. But he had nothing else pending. It was worth a gamble *if* an offer was actually made to him by Peter Straus. Fairchild's overture was tentative. Straus had to personally make the final decision.

During the first week in August, Nebel was interrupted during his meal at Ho Ho by a phone call from Fairchild. It was bad news. Fairchild was pessimistic about Straus' upcoming decision regarding the all-night show.

That night when Nebel returned to his apartment after doing his WNBC show, he found a message on his tape machine. It was from Fairchild, telling him not to make a deal with anyone else. WMCA wanted him.

The negotiations with Straus and Fairchild were complicated only by Nebel's idiosyncrasies. The financial arrangements were simple. Nebel would work for fifty percent of the advertising revenues. But he had to have office space, *big* office space. Fairchild found him two vacant offices. The deal was made. Leon Lewis took over the early afternoon spot. Nebel had midnight, right after Barry Gray, giving WMCA the strongest night-time talk twosome in the business.

Nebel chose not to have a guest on his first WMCA show. He brought along some of his regular panelists and took phone calls. He was visibly nervous during the first hour, and there were some slips—a few times he gave the WNBC call letters during the station break; another time he gave WNBC's phone number. But he settled down eventually into the role that had been like a broken-in-pipe to him for the past sixteen years, host of an all-night talk show in New York.

Barry Gray was in Europe when Nebel began broadcasting on WMCA. Before he went, however, he had recorded an introduction for Nebel's show. It said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Barry Gray *again*—and this is a new and happy role for me, extremely happy, because I have the singular honor of introducing, for the first time to this WMCA audience, a man I've admired and been a friend of for a very long time. He's worked down the broadcast block from me for many years and has attracted an enormous and loyal following, understandably so, because he's a good and kind and decent human being. He's also an expert broadcaster, one of the best. I refer to Long John Nebel who, tonight and every night hereafter at this hour, will be heard in this WMCA time slot. He will be in tandem. His broadcast will follow mine, so that I can rush home and listen to him. And so, John, I offer my hand, my friendship, my support and my ears, along with, I hope, millions of listeners.

"Long John, come on!"

18

*"I never think of the future. It comes soon enough." **

The king lives! Only the kingdom changed from WNBC to WMCA. The king's subjects, talk-starved radio listeners, switched over to his new station. So did his sponsors. New sponsors signed up, and within a month Long John Nebel, through his fifty-fifty plan with WMCA, was making twice the salary he'd been making at WNBC. The commercials came fast and furious, each, in Elia Kazan's words, "an aria." Nebel had to ask some sponsors to accept fewer spots each night in the interest of the show. The old spark was there, the bite, the verve for talking all night. Same king—new throne.

* Albert Einstein

19

"Cue the proposal."

The success of the new show on WMCA left Nebel pleased, proud, and strangely unhappy. He no longer had what he has always needed—a woman with whom he could share his success. The show itself, always an attentive, adoring mistress, could never truly compete with the real thing.

The final days of his tumultuous relationship with the younger girl had drained him. He was too exhausted to think about pursuing another woman. He was also filled with nagging doubts about his health, certain he could never impose his physical problems upon another woman, even though, in reality, his health was quite good. The cancer was under control; the prognosis by his battery of doctors still optimistic.

The show occupied his thoughts. Anne Lombardo came back into the fold. It was like old times. The WMCA studio, previously built especially for Barry Gray, became a comfortable refuge for him. It is a suspended studio, much larger than WNBC's, with a cushion of air under its floor to muffle the sound of subway trains passing beneath the building at Seventh Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street. It contains nine small tables shaped in such

a way that they can be placed together to form a circle. Three of the tables are joined together where Nebel sits, to give him room for his commercial copy, microphone, control box, and telephone equipment. The other tables, covered with wood-grain formica and resting on buff metal pedestals, are strung out in a detached circle, with five feet between each. The walls are cream-colored vinyl panels that appear, at a distance, to be peg-board. They are acoustical panels.

Nebel faces the control room, which is visible through a long window. His engineers—Lula Shepard, Poppa Joe Franz, or David Kuraner, sit behind the window. In back of Nebel is another long window that separates the studio from a room reserved for sponsors and their guests who wish to view programs in progress. Since sponsors are at home and in bed when Nebel broadcasts, the room is always dark during his show.

Each panelist's table contains an RCA BK-5B omni-directional microphone. A small black box, manufactured by the Bell System, sits on each table and is used when Nebel opens the phones. Everyone in the studio puts on earphones through which they can hear the caller.

One night in the late Fall of 1972, Nebel handed me a letter just before we went on the air. It was written to him by his old friend, model Candy Jones. She was obviously not aware of his split with the young girl because she suggested at the end of the letter that the three of them have dinner together some night.

"Have you ever met her?" Nebel asked me.

I said I hadn't.

"She's absolutely beautiful," he said.

"Why don't you call her?" I suggested.

"No."

He did call her during the first week in December. After a long conversation, he fearfully invited her to have dinner with him at Antolotti's. She accepted.

Candy says that during dinner she felt a need to touch him. She thought of the classic ruse of pretending to read his palm, but wanted to be more inventive.

"John, whatever happened to your knuckles?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I never realized you had that problem with your knuckles," she continued. "They're inverted."

Nebel looked down as she took his hand and held it.

"And your ears," she said, reaching up with her other hand and grabbing his ear lobe through muttonchop sideburns. "Of course. Inverted knuckles are always accompanied by slanted ear lobes. Fox ears, they're called."

Nebel laughed. She was putting him on. But later as he followed her out of Antolotti's, she glanced back and saw that he was walking slowly, looking down at his hands.

They were on the phone every night after that, and had dinner together three or four nights a week. Their paths had crossed before, but Nebel had never realized what those earlier meetings meant to Candy Jones.

Their first meeting had taken place when Nebel photographed her at her apartment for the Borden Company. The shots showed her holding a milk carton and a glass. Her hair was in pigtails and she wore a red-and-white checkered shirt. Nebel had received the assignment from his friend, Kurt Gunther. Candy remembers his demeanor that day—professional, intense, gentlemanly.

Nebel photographed her a second time, also for Borden publicity photographs; the subject of the ad was ice cream. She asked him about his personal life, including his marital status. He told her he was married.

"For how long?"

"Seven years."

"Good grief, I didn't think anyone was married for seven years," she replied.

Candy Jones, whose real name is Jessica Wilcox, was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She and her mother moved to Atlantic City when she was sixteen. The year they moved, Candy entered a contest to find Atlantic City's hostess for that year's Miss America Pageant. She won, and one of the judges, John Robert Powers, asked her to come to New York to audition for a print ad. Candy didn't get the job because, as they told her, she walked like a football player and had wrinkles in her neck when she turned her head. A girl friend, who was employed at the modeling agency headed by Harry Conover, suggested she

stop there before returning home. She did, was grabbed on the spot for an ad assignment, and never left. She married Conover in 1946 and divorced him in 1959.

She didn't think about, or see, the photographer with the crew cut, Jack Knebel, until he'd completed eight years on WOR and had shifted over to WNBC. At least she didn't think she thought about him. She went to sleep almost every night listening to someone on the radio named Long John Nebel. It was her favorite program, especially when he told stories of his childhood in what she terms a Chicago twang.

Following her divorce from Conover, she began seeing a noted New York newspaperman. One night, while they were attending Julie London's opening at the Royal Box, Candy's escort jumped up from the table to greet someone named John. Candy looked up and saw a tall, thin gentleman in elegant dinner clothes. She knew she should be gracious and ask him to join them, but she was interested in finishing the conversation she and the newspaperman had been having. After chatting with her escort for a few minutes, Nebel told Candy he had photographed her. It meant nothing to her. It was only after they'd said their good-byes that the newspaperman mentioned to Candy that his friend was Long John Nebel. She spent the rest of the evening looking back at his table, where Nebel was sitting with Charlotte.

"Who's the lady?" she asked.

"His wife."

Candy Jones' newspaper friend had been on the Nebel show at WOR. When he was invited back after Nebel shifted to WNBC, he brought Candy with him. A week later, she received a call from Anna Marie Goetz, who asked her to come on the show as a guest. She appeared, but was so nervous she could barely speak.

Her acquaintanceship with the newspaperman was marred only once, by an argument that occurred during lunch, after Candy had made other appearances on Nebel's show.

"I'm really tired of hearing you talk about John Nebel," her friend told her. "That's all we seem to talk about these days." Candy realized it was true. Each day she reported to him what she'd heard on the Nebel show the night before.

"I want to ask two favors of you," the newspaperman said.

"One, I want you to never mention him again. Two, I don't want you to appear on the show anymore."

Candy agreed, and stuck to her promise. She had not promised, however, never to ask Nebel to appear on *her* show. She'd recently begun doing interviews for NBC's network radio weekend service, "Monitor," and had also filled in on the lunchtime interview show conducted by Mimi Benzel. She asked Nebel to be her guest. He accepted—more than once, despite his schedule. Her schedule, too, was hectic. Besides doing her radio chores, she continued to guide her Candy Jones Charm School and Personality Representation Agency, both flourishing enterprises.

The newspaperman died of stomach cancer in February, and the first person Candy called was John Nebel. He took her to the funeral.

In the following December, Nebel made his call to Candy. They had their dinners together. They told each other of their love. Candy got the flu in mid-December; Nebel came down with it soon after. He was still weak from it on Christmas Eve, when he and Candy headed out to Long Island for the wedding of Danny Bergauer's daughter.

The limousine drove through the Queens Midtown Tunnel and out on the Long Island Expressway. Nebel had brought a shopping bag with him. Sweating profusely and feeling light-headed, he turned to Candy and told her the bag contained Christmas presents. He wanted her to open them in the car.

She started removing and unwrapping the gifts. There was a Sony portable tape recorder, a big teddy bear, a gold bracelet from Cartier's in the shape of a nail, a chromatic harmonica (she plays the instrument), and a card. The card said "cue" on it. It instructed her to cue Nebel. She pointed at him, and he immediately went to one knee on the limousine's back floor. An envelope was under the card. She opened it. It read: Will you marry me?

Candy accepted the proposal. Nebel climbed back onto the seat. The sweat soaked his clothing. He had trouble breathing, and began to moan. The driver wanted to get off the road and rush him to a hospital, but Nebel insisted that the driver turn around and take them back to his apartment. When they got there, Nebel was too weak to exit the car. Bill Roff came down and helped him to the apartment.

The next morning, Candy made a suggestion. June 8 had always been her favorite day, so she suggested they wait until then to marry. Nebel accused her of wanting to back out. She retorted that maybe his sickness was a panic reaction to her acceptance of his proposal. Eventually June 8 was forgotten. They'd marry on New Year's Eve day, at Ken Knigin's apartment.

New Year's Eve was a joyous night for John Nebel. Accompanied by his bride of a few hours, he followed his usual custom of spending it at Ho Ho, where many of his listeners came to pay homage, deliver gifts, and have a picture taken with their midnight hero. He was wearing a silver wig given to him by Candy for the occasion. Some of the wedding guests were also there—Sandy Teller, Bob Carson, Gene Frisch and his wife, Hanna and Milton Kapit, and this writer and spouse.

John and Candy Nebel left Ho Ho at one in the morning. They went to a suite at the Drake Hotel and made love. When they were finished, Candy reached over to the night table.

"What are you doing?" Nebel asked.

"Getting something."

"Are you happy?" he asked.

Candy didn't answer. She sat up in bed, put a match to a Fourth of July sparkler, held it over her head, and smiled as the sparks cascaded over them in reply.

Long John Nebel, charlatan, salesman, and king of late-night talk radio, says his biography will end with Phil Moore and Sy Oliver playing "My Way" at his funeral, and no one else present. He's probably right; fewer people will show up than might be expected. There will be business conflicts for some, personal commitments for others. Then again, it might turn out to be the funeral of the year, as hundreds of faces unknown to anyone come to pay their respects to their midnight companion, Long John. There has always been something for everyone on Nebel's thousands of all-night radio marathons. You can hate him, love him—take your choice. It doesn't matter as long as you're there, listening, reacting, *buying*.

I remember walking with John Nebel one winter's night in 1970. We'd had dinner at Ho Ho and were on our way back to

WNBC's studios. A man passing by stopped, did a double-take, and came up to Nebel.

"Hey. Are you Long John?"

"Yes, sir," Nebel replied.

"I knew it. I really knew it. Hey, wait a minute." The man began fishing in his pockets. Nebel assumed he was looking for a pencil with which to have him sign an autograph, so he pulled a pen from his own pocket and handed it to the man.

"You got any paper?" the man asked.

Nebel smiled and started looking for some. Then the man spotted a paper bag in the gutter, picked it up, and handed it to Nebel.

"I want three bottles of Super-M Vitamins," the man said, coming up with nine dollars in bills. "I keep meaning to send in for them but always forget."

Nebel put the man's vitamin order in when we got back to WNBC. He didn't seem particularly impressed by the scene that had been played on the street, but for me, it was spectacular, a topper to the salesman's success story.

By the time this book is published, there will no longer be a "Long John Nebel Show" on WMCA. It is to become the "Long John Nebel and Candy Jones Show," the only husband-and-wife late-night radio show in New York. Candy's business enterprises are also being changed under Nebel's guidance, with the restructuring designed to allow her more time for the show.

Nebel sleeps little these days. His voice is strong, his carriage erect and vital. The adjoining apartment is again leased to him to house Candy's writing studio (she's published ten books) and to allow for the expansion of Nebel's broadcasting activities. His ratings are tops at WMCA, his income is solid and is growing each week.

The New York radio scene is constantly shifting as station managements attempt to come up with formats that will capture a respectable share of the rich New York market. Nebel, always an astute observer of *his business*, has watched the changes since his move to WMCA. He dismisses many of them with an offhand comment or a grin. He could easily be smug about what the changes represent. WNBC's all-night-music policy proved to be

a dismal flop. The station's management tried to hire Barry Farber away from WOR to do the all-night show, but Farber turned down their offers, and as of the summer of 1973, broadcasts in the eight-to-midnight slot so hated by Nebel when he was at WNBC. WNBC then turned to Alan Douglas, a Cleveland talk show host who'd originally been brought to New York by Pat Whitley to take over the eight-to-midnight spot vacated by Nebel. Douglas became WNBC's all-night talker in the summer of 1973. The move puts WNBC back where it started—its all-night time leading into Don Imus is again a talk show, but without benefit of Nebel's pulling power in the market.

John Wingate, a prima newsman, has taken over the all-night show at WOR. Initial ratings on the Wingate effort were disappointing, although it often takes time for a new personality to establish ratings in a time slot.

Representatives of both WOR and WNBC have made discreet inquiries regarding Nebel's availability. Nebel, of course, listened. He always does. But it's doubtful that he'll move from WMCA. It treats him with the respect due radio's master salesman, broadcasting's biggest all-night voice. He travels by limousine. His love for Candy Jones is a twenty-four-hour-a-day affair, and he doesn't even have to worry any longer about what to do with a night off. The show runs seven nights a week now, and Nebel's only complaint is that he isn't allowed to broadcast twelve hours a day, with the other twelve hours a repeat of previous Nebel shows.

"I'm very happy now," says Long John Nebel.

I believe him, and he isn't even selling.



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