

JUKE-BOX

By Henry Kuttner

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Nobody Loves Me, wails Jerry Foster—until a mechanical music-maker decides everything's just Moonlight and Roses

Jerry Foster told the bartender that nobody loved him. The bartender, with the experience of his trade, said that Jerry was mistaken, and how about another drink.

“Why not?” said the unhappy Mr. Foster, examining the scanty contents of his wallet. “ ‘I’ll take the daughter of the vine to spouse. Nor heed the music of a distant drum.’ That’s Omar.”

“Sure,” the bartender said surprisingly. “But you want to look out you don’t go out by the same door that in you went. No brawls allowed here. This isn’t East Fifth, chum.”

“You may call me chum,” Foster said, reverting to the main topic, “but you don’t mean it. I’m nobody’s pal. Nobody loves me.”

“What about that babe you brought in last night?”

Foster tested his drink. He was a good-looking, youngish man with slick blond hair and a rather hazy expression in his blue eyes.

“Betty?” he murmured. “Well, the fact is, a while ago I was down at the Tom-Tom with Betty and this redhead came along. So I ditched Betty. Then the redhead iced me. Now I’m lonely, and everyone hates me.”

“You shouldn’t of ditched Betty, maybe,” the bartender suggested.

“I’m fickle,” Foster said, tears springing to his eyes. “I can’t help it. Women are my downfall. Gimme another drink and tell me your name.”

“Austin.”

“Austin. Well, Austin, I’m nearly in trouble. Did you notice who won the fifth at Santa Anita yesterday?”

“Pig’s Trotters, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Foster said, “but I laid my dough right on the nose of White Flash. That’s why I’m here. Sammy comes around to this joint now, doesn’t he?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m lucky,” Foster said. “I got the money to pay him. Sammy is a hard man when you don’t pay off.”

“I wouldn’t know,” the bartender said. “Excuse me.”

He moved off to take care of a couple of vodka collinses.

“So you hate me too,” Foster said, and, picking up his drink, wandered away from the bar.

He was surprised to see Betty sitting alone in a booth, watching him. But he was not at all surprised to see that her blond hair, her limpid eyes, her pink-and-white skin had lost all attraction for him. She bored him. Also, she was going to make a nuisance of herself.

Foster ignored the girl and went further back, to where a bulky oblong object was glowing in polychromatic colors against the far

wall. It was what the manufacturers insist on terming an automatic phonograph, in spite of the more aptly descriptive word juke-box.

This was a lovely juke-box. It had lots of lights and colors. Moreover, it wasn't watching Foster, and it kept its mouth shut.

Foster draped himself over the juke-box and patted its sleek sides.

"You're my girl," he announced. "You're beautiful. I love you madly, do you hear? Madly."

He could feel Betty's gaze on his back. He swigged his drink and smoothed the juke-box's flanks, glibly protesting his sudden affection for the object. Once he glanced around. Betty was starting to get up.

Foster hastily found a nickel in his pocket and slipped it into the coin-lever, but before he could push it in, a stocky, dark man wearing horn-rimmed glasses entered the bar, nodded at Foster, and moved quickly to a booth where a fat person in tweeds was sitting. There was a short consultation, during which money changed hands, and the stocky man made a note in a small book he brought from his pocket.

Foster took out his wallet. He had had trouble with Sammy before, and wanted no more. The bookie was insistent on his pound of flesh. Foster counted his money, blinked, and counted it again, while his stomach fell several feet. Either he had been short-changed, or he had lost some dough. He was short.

Sammy wouldn't like that.

Forcing his fogged brain to think, Foster wondered how he could gain time. Sammy had already seen him. If he could duck out the back.

It had become altogether too silent in the bar. He needed noise to cover his movements. He saw the nickel in the juke-box's coin-lever and hastily pushed it in.

Money began to spew out of the coin return slot.

Foster got his hat under the slot almost instantly. Quarters, dimes, and nickels popped out in a never-ending stream. The juke-box broke into song. A needle scratched over the black disc. The torchy mourning of "My Man" came out sadly. It covered the tinkling of the coins as they filled Foster's hat.

After a while the money stopped coming out of the juke-box. Foster stood there, thanking his personal gods, as he saw Sammy moving toward him. The bookie glanced at Foster's hat and blinked.

"Hi, Jerry. What gives?"

"I hit a jackpot," Foster said.

"Not on the juke-box!"

"No, down at the Onyx," Foster said, naming a private club several blocks away. "Haven't had a chance to get these changed into bills yet. Want to help me out?"

"I'm no cash register," Sammy said. "I'll take mine in green."

The juke-box stopped playing "My Man" and broke into "Always." Foster put his jingling hat on top of the phonograph and

counted out bills. He didn't have enough, but he made the balance up out of quarters he fished from the hat.

"Thanks," Sammy said. "Too bad your nag didn't make it."

"*'With a love that's true, always—'*" the juke-box sang fervently.

"Can't be helped," Foster said. "Maybe next time I'll hit 'em."

"Want anything on Oaklawn?"

"*'When the things you've planned, need a helping hand—'*"

Foster had been leaning on the juke-box. On the last two words, a tingling little shock raced through him. Those particular two words jumped out of nothing, impinged on the surface of his brain, and sank in indelibly, like the stamp of a die. He couldn't hear anything else. They echoed and re-echoed.

"Uh—helping hand," he said hazily. "Helping—"

"A sleeper?" Sammy said. "Okay, Helping Hand in the third, at Oaklawn. The usual?"

The room started to turn around. Foster managed to nod. After a time he discovered that Sammy was gone. He saw his drink on the juke-box, next to his hat, and swallowed the cool liquid in three quick gulps. Then he bent and stared into the cryptic innards of the automatic phonograph.

"It can't be," he whispered. "I'm drunk. But not drunk enough. I need another shot."

A quarter rolled out of the coin-return slot, and Foster automatically caught it.

“No!” he gulped. “Oh-h-h!” He stuffed his pockets with the booty from the hat, held on to his glass with the grip of a drowning man, and went toward the bar. On the way he felt someone touch his sleeve.

“Jerry,” Betty said. “Please.”

He ignored her. He went on to the bar and ordered another drink.

“Look, Austin,” he said. “That juke-box you got back there. Is it working all right?”

Austin squeezed a lime. He didn’t look up.

“I don’t hear any complaints.”

“But—”

Austin slid a replenished glass toward Foster.

“Excuse me,” he said, and went to the other end of the bar.

Foster stole a look at the juke-box. It sat against the wall glowing enigmatically.

“I don’t exactly know what to think,” he said to no one in particular.

A record started playing. The juke-box sang throatily:

“ ‘Leave us face it, we’re in love....’ ”

The truth was, Jerry Foster was feeling pretty low in those days. He was essentially a reactionary, so it was a mistake for him to have been born in an era of great change. He needed the feel of solid ground under his feet. And the ground wasn’t so solid any

more, what with the newspaper headlines and new patterns for living emerging out of the vast technological and sociological changes the mid-Twentieth Century offered.

You've got to be elastic to survive in a changing culture. Back in the stable Twenties, Foster would have got along beautifully, but now, in a word, he just wasn't on the ball. A man like that seeks stable security as his ultimo, and security seemed to have vanished.

The result was that Jerry Foster found himself out of a job, badly in debt, and drinking far more than he should have done. The only real advantage to that set-up was that alcohol buffered Foster's incredulity when he encountered the affectionate juke-box.

Not that he remembered it the next morning. He didn't recall what had happened for a couple of days, till Sammy looked him up and gave him nine hundred dollars, the result of Helping Hand coming in under the wire at Oaklawn. The long shot had paid off surprisingly.

Foster instantly went on a binge, finding himself eventually at a downtown bar he recognized. Austin was off duty, however, and Betty wasn't present tonight. So Foster, tanked to the gills, leaned his elbow on polished mahogany and stared around. Toward the back was the juke-box. He blinked at it, trying to remember.

The juke-box began to play "I'll Remember April." The whirling confusion of insobriety focused down to a small, clear, cold spot in Foster's brain. He started to tingle. His mouth formed words:

"Remember April—Remember April?"

"All right!" said a fat, unshaven, untidy man standing next to him. "I heard you! I'll—What did you say?"

“Remember April,” Foster muttered, quite automatically. The fat man spilled his drink.

“It isn’t! It’s March!”

Foster peered around dimly in search of a calendar.

“It’s April third,” he affirmed presently. “Why?”

“I’ve got to get back, then,” said the fat man in desperation. He scrubbed at his sagging cheeks. “April already! How long have I been tight? You don’t know? It’s your business to know. April! One more drink, then.” He summoned the bartender.

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a man with a hatchet. Foster, blearily eying the apparition, almost decided to get out in search of a quieter gin-mill. This new figure, bursting in from the street, was a skinny blond man with wild eyes and the shakes. Before anyone could stop him, he had rushed the length of the room and lifted his hatchet threateningly above the juke-box.

“I can’t stand it!” he cried hysterically. “You spiteful little—I’ll fix you before you fix me!”

So saying, and ignoring the purposeful approach of the bartender, the blond man brought down his hatchet heavily on the juke-box. There was a blue crackle of flame, a tearing noise, and the blond man collapsed without a sound.

Foster stayed where he was. There was a bottle on the bar near him, and he captured it. Rather dimly, he realized what was happening. An ambulance was summoned. A doctor said the blond man had been painfully shocked, but was still alive. The juke-box had a

smashed panel, but appeared uninjured otherwise. Austin came from somewhere and poured himself a shot from under the bar.

“ ‘Each man kills the thing he loves,’ ” Austin said to Foster. “You’re the guy who was quoting Omar at me the other night, aren’t you?”

“What?” Foster said.

Austin nodded at the motionless figure being loaded on a stretcher.

“Funny business. That fella used to come in all the time just to play the juke-box. He was in love with the thing. Sat here by the hour listening to it. Course, when I say he was in love with it, I’m merely using a figure of speech, catch?”

“Sure,” Foster said.

“Then a couple of days ago he blows up. Crazy as a loon. I come in and find the guy on his knees in front of the juke-box, begging it to forgive him for something or other. I don’t get it. Some people shouldn’t drink, I guess. What’s yours?”

“The same,” Foster said, watching the ambulance men carry the stretcher out of the bar.

“Just mild electric shock,” an intern said. “He’ll be all right.”

The juke-box clicked, and a new record swung across. Something must have gone wrong with the amplification, for the song bellowed out with deafening intensity.

“ ‘Chlo-eee!’ ” screamed the juke-box urgently. “ ‘*Chlo-eeee!*’ ”

Deafened, fighting the feeling that this was hallucination, Foster found himself beside the juke-box. He clung to it against the mad billows of sound. He shook it, and the roaring subsided.

“ ‘Chlo-eee!’ ” the juke-box sang softly and sweetly.

There was confusion nearby, but Foster ignored it. He had been struck by an idea. He peered into the phonograph’s innards through the glass pane. The record was slowing now, and as the needle lifted Foster could read the title on the circular label.

It said, “Springtime in the Rockies.”

The record hastily lifted itself and swung back to concealment among the others in the rack. Another black disc moved over under the needle. It was “Twilight in Turkey.”

But what the juke-box played, with great expression, was: “We’ll Always Be Sweethearts.”

After a while the confusion died down. Austin came over, examined the phonograph, and made a note to get the broken panel replaced. Foster had entirely forgotten the fat, unshaven, untidy man till he heard an irritated voice behind him say:

“It can’t be April!”

“What?”

“You’re a liar. It’s still March.”

“Oh, take a walk,” said Foster, who was profoundly shaken, though he did not quite know why. The obvious reasons for his nervousness, he suspected, weren’t the real ones.

“You’re a liar, I said,” the fat man snarled, breathing heavily in Foster’s face. “It’s March! You’ll either admit it’s March, or—or—”

But Foster had had enough. He pushed the fat man away and had taken two steps when a tingling shock raced through him and the small, cold, spot of clarity sprang into existence within his brain.

The juke-box started to play; “Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative.”

“It’s March!” the fat man yelled. “Isn’t it March?”

“Yes,” Foster said thickly. “It’s March.”

All that night the song-title blazed in his mind. He went home with the fat man. He drank with the fat man. He agreed with the fat man. He never used a negative. And, by morning, he was surprised to find that the fat man had hired him as a song-writer for Summit Studios, simply because Foster didn’t say no when he was asked whether he could write songs.

“Good,” the fat man said. “Now I’d better get home. Oh, I am home, aren’t I? Well, I gotta go to the studio tomorrow. We’re starting a super-musical April second, and—This is April, isn’t it?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s get some sleep. No, not that door. The swimming-pool’s out there. Here, I’ll show you a spare bedroom. You’re sleepy, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Foster, who wasn’t.

But he slept, nevertheless, and the next morning found himself at Summit Studios with the fat man, putting his signature on a contract. Nobody asked his qualifications. Taliaferro, the fat man, had okayed him. That was enough. He was given an office with a piano and a secretary, and sat dazedly behind his desk for most of the day, wondering how the devil it had all happened. At the commissary, however, he picked up some scraps of information.

Taliaferro was a big shot—a very big shot. He had one idiosyncrasy. He couldn't endure disagreement. Only yes-men were allowed around him. Those who worked for Taliaferro had to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative.

Foster got his assignment. A romantic love song for the new picture. A duet. Everyone took it for granted that Foster knew one note from another. He did, having studied piano in his youth, but counterpoint and the mysteries of minor keys were far beyond him.

That night he went back to the little downtown bar.

It was just a hunch, but he thought the juke-box might be able to help him. Not that he really believed in such things, but at worst, he could hoist a few shots and try to figure a way out. But the juke-box kept playing one song over and over.

The odd thing was that nobody else heard that particular song. Foster discovered that quite by accident. To Austin's ears, the juke-box was going through an ordinary repertoire of modern popular stuff.

After that, Foster listened more closely. The song was a haunting duet, plaintive and curiously tender. It had overtones in it that made Foster's spine tingle.

“Who wrote that thing?” he asked Austin.

“Wasn’t it Hoagy Carmichael?”

But they were talking at cross-purposes. The juke-box suddenly sang. “I Dood It,” and then relapsed into the duet.

“No,” Austin said. “I guess it wasn’t Hoagy. That’s an old one. ‘Dardanella.’ ”

But it wasn’t “Dardanella.”

Foster saw a piano at the back. He went to it and got out his notebook. First he wrote the lyrics. Then he tried to get the notes down, but they were beyond him, even with the piano as a guide. The best he could achieve was a sort of shorthand. His own voice was true and good, and he thought he might be able to sing the piece accurately, if he could find someone to put down the notes for him.

When he finished, he studied the juke-box more closely. The broken panel had been repaired. He patted the gadget in a friendly way and went away thinking hard.

His secretary’s name was Lois Kennedy. She came into his office the next day while Foster was tapping at the piano and helplessly endeavoring to write down the score.

“Let me help you, Mr. Foster,” she said competently, casting a practised eye over the messy pages.

“I—no, thanks,” Foster said.

“Are you bad on scores?” she asked as she smiled. “A lot of composers are that way. They play by ear, but they don’t know G sharp from A flat.”

“They don’t, eh?” Foster murmured.

The girl eyed him intently. “Suppose you run through it, and I’ll mark down a rough scoring.”

Foster hit a few chords. “Phooey!” he said at last, and picked up the lyrics. Those were readable, anyway. He began to hum.

“Swell,” Lois said. “Just sing it. I’ll catch the melody.”

Foster’s voice was true, and he found it surprisingly easy to remember the love song the juke-box had played. He sang it, and Lois presently played it on the piano, while Foster corrected and revised. At least he could tell what was wrong and what was right. And, since Lois had lived music since her childhood, she had little difficulty in recording the song on paper.

Afterwards she was enthusiastic.

“It’s swell,” she said. “Something really new. Mr. Foster, you’re good. And you’re not lifting from Mozart, either. I’ll shoot this right over to the big boy. Usually it’s smart not to be in too much of a hurry, but since this is your first job here, we’ll chance it.”

Taliaferro liked the song. He made a few useless suggestions, which Foster, with Lois’s aid, incorporated, and sent down a list of what else was needed for the super-musical. He also called a conclave of the song-writers to listen to Foster’s opus.

“I want you to hear what’s good,” Taliaferro told them. “This new find of mine is showing you up. I think we need new blood,” he

finished darkly, eyeing the wretched song-writers with ominous intensity.

But Foster quaked in his boots. For all he knew, his song might have been plagiarized. He expected someone in the audience to spring up and shout:

“That new find of yours swiped his song from Berlin!”

Or Gershwin or Porter or Hammerstein, as the case might be.

Nobody exposed him. The song was new. It established Foster as a double-threat man, since he had done both melody and lyrics himself.

He was a success.

Every night he had his ritual. Alone, he visited a certain downtown bar. When necessary, the juke-box helped him with his songs. It seemed to know exactly what was needed. It asked little in return. It served him with the unquestioning fidelity of ‘Cigarette’ in “Under Two Flags.” And sometimes it played love songs aimed at Foster’s ears and heart. It serenaded him. Sometimes, too, Foster thought he was going crazy.

Weeks passed. Foster got all his assignments done at the little downtown bar, and later whipped them into suitable shape with his secretary’s assistance. He had begun to notice that she was a strikingly pretty girl, with attractive eyes and lips. Lois seemed amenable, but so far Foster had held back from any definite commitment. He felt unsure of his new triumphs.

But he blossomed like the rose. His bank account grew fat, he looked sleeker and drank much less, and he visited the downtown bar every night. Once he asked Austin about it.

“That juke-box. Where’d it come from?”

“I don’t know,” Austin said. “It was here before I came.”

“Well, who puts new records in it?”

“The company, I suppose.”

“Ever see ’em do it?”

Austin thought. “Can’t say I have. I guess the man comes around when the other bartender’s on duty. It’s got a new set of records on every day, though. That’s good service.”

Foster made a note to ask the other bartender about it. But there was no time. For, the next day, he kissed Lois Kennedy.

That was a mistake. It was the booster charge. The next thing Jerry Foster knew, he was making the rounds with Lois, and it was after dark, and they were driving unsteadily along the Sunset Strip, discussing life and music.

“I’m going places,” Foster said, dodging an oddly ambulatory telephone pole. “We’re going places together.”

“Oh, honey!” Lois said.

Foster stopped the car and kissed her.

“That calls for another drink,” he remarked. “Is that a bar over there?”

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