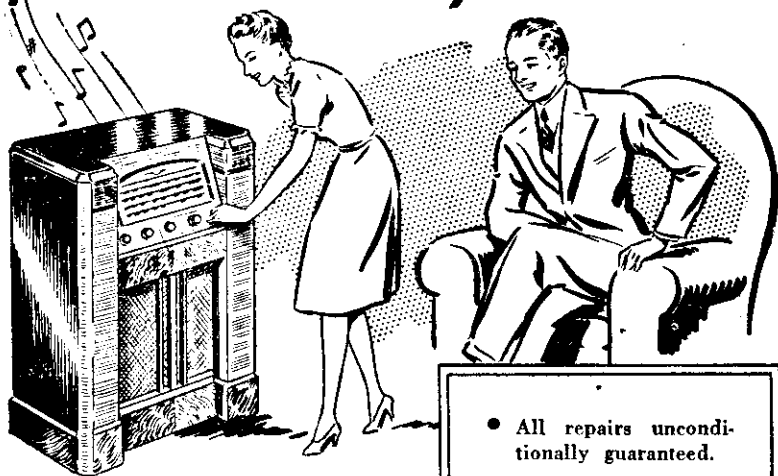


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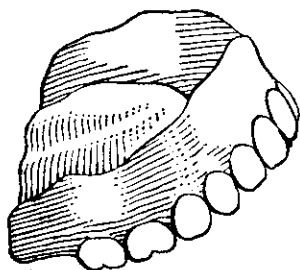
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SHORT STORY

JUKE-BOX

Written for "The Listener"
by R. HUTCHINS

LISTEN, be a pal, and let's go some place else. Yeah, I know the food is good, and it's a nice clean place—but I still don't want to go here. Used to come here for lunch every day. The waitress?—no, it was only that juke-box over there. Matter of fact, it was the first one they had in Queen Street. Used to draw a lot of hicks who'd never heard of one before. You'd see them all standing around, gawking at it, even when it wasn't playing. And you had to push your way through to put in your zac to play it. Then they would all crane their necks as the record was lifted and swung slick and neat on to the platter. You would think it was magic, the way they crowded around to watch—it was kind of cute, too, with its bright yellow and red and green and chromium fittings, standing amidst the crowd in the front of the milk-bar. Anyway, many's the sixpence I pushed into it in that first week. Got to know all the best records, and which number to push to get them, too. The best was a rugged trumpet by Muggsy. Good and solid. The toasted ham sandwiches and coffee went down good, listening to that. Music helps digestion too, so they say. Anyway, one day I was soaking up the vitamins and the rhythm when she came into my life. She comes and sits at my table. A real peach. Sort of yellow hair hanging long to her shoulders. And green eyes and a purple lipstick. A grouse little thrush. So grouse, in fact, that the juke-box died away into the background in my head, and it was only the waitress coming with her coffee that broke the spell.

After a couple of sips she asks, "You got two sixpences for this?" I look at the shilling in her hand and think here is my chance. "What's your choice?" I say, the perfect gentleman.

"Number seven," she says, with her green eyes all coy. So number seven it is.

As I sit down again, I hear the record. A straight commercial by Dinah. Not the real thing, not like she can really sing.

"Thanks," she says before Dinah starts. "That's O.K.," I say and just launch into my line when the lyric begins. So I keep quiet for Dinah and Green-Eyes. She listens. Sometimes she shuts her eyes, and opens them suddenly to smile cute at me. The slow bass sometimes sways her shoulders and yellow hair over her half-cold coffee and my toasted ham. The song seems to mean something to her. So I listen. It's a love-song. The usual thing with broken hearts and where have you gone and somebody

new and I still love you sort of thing. Heard it lots of times before, and not thought much of it. But listening now with green eyes and yellow hair and lilac lips swaying in front of me it seems different. The melody seems richer, the bass so soft and intimate, and the lyric seems to make more sense. Funny, that. Must have been the tone of the juke-box or the toasted ham sandwiches, or something. So there I sit out the three minutes, hoping my hair is neat and trying to hide where my front filling fell out.

Dinah finishes and I get set to impress Lilac-Lips. But she thanks me very much and gets up without giving me a chance. Which only adds to the mystery.

BACK at work the boys kid me when I tell them about my affair at the juke-box. But I knew even then it was only the beginning. All next morning I was waiting for noon to try out my hunch. And I had sixpence ready this time. Sure enough in comes Green-Eyes. I am all ready. In goes the coin. The soft whirring begins. The strings and the saxes go into the intro. She smiles. Just like yesterday, only more so. I play Dinah over again. And pay for her coffee, and she has a salad, too.

Back at work the boys don't kid me so much this time. They can see that something's to it. And all afternoon I try to recall that mood with Dinah and Green-Eyes and toasted ham sandwiches.

Well, to make it short, it goes on better and better each day. The juke-box is our rendezvous. Each noon, the same soft whirrings, the same soft intro, and the same sad lyric. The juke-box itself seems more shinier, its colours brighter and its chromium more dazzling each day. Its red and yellow lights glow even brighter with our love. The bubbles



"After work, too, we go and listen to our love-song"