

The Foster Portfolio

My business is handling other people's money, and I have a great respect for money.

But how could I help a man like Herbert Foster, who had such an odd feeling about it?

By KURT VONNEGUT, Jr.

I'm a salesman of good advice for rich people. I'm a contact man for an investment counseling firm. It's a living, but not a whale of a one —or at least not now, when I'm just starting out. To qualify for the job, I had to buy a Homburg, a navy-blue overcoat, a double-breasted banker's-gray suit, black shoes, a regimental-stripe tie, half a dozen white shirts, half a dozen pairs of black socks and gray gloves.

When I call on a client, I come by cab, and I am sleek and clean and foursquare. I carry myself as though I've made a quiet killing on the stock market, and am calling on him more as a public service than anything else. When I arrive in clean wool, with crackling certificates and confidential stock analyses in crisp Manila folders, the reaction —ideally and usually—is the same accorded a minister or physician. I am in charge, and everything is going to be just fine.

I deal mostly with old ladies—the meek, who by dint of cast-iron constitutions have inherited sizable portions of the earth. I thumb through the clients' lists of securities, and relay our experts' suggestions for ways of making their portfolios—or bonanzas or piles—thrive and increase. I can speak of tens of thousands of dollars without a catch in my throat, and look at a list of securities worth more than a hundred thousand with no more fuss than a judicious “Mmmmm, uh-huh.”

Since I don't have a portfolio, my job is a little like being a hungry delivery boy for a candy store. But I never really felt that way about it until Herbert Foster asked me to have a look at his finances.

He called one evening to say a friend had recommended me, and could I come out to talk business. I washed, shaved, dusted my shoes, put on my uniform, and made my grave arrival by cab.

People in my business—and maybe people in general—have an unsavory habit of sizing up a man's house, car and suit, and estimating his annual income. Herbert Foster was thirty-five hundred a year, or I'd never seen it. Understand, I have nothing against people in moderate circumstances, other than the crucial fact that I can't make any money off them. It made me a little sore that Foster would take my time, when the most he had to play around with, I guessed, was no more than a few hundred dollars. Say it was a thousand: my take would be a dollar or two at best.

ANYWAY, there I was in the Fosters' jerry-built, postwar colonial with expansion attic, the kind of house that has a prewar car in the one-car garage. They had taken up a local furniture store on its offer of three rooms of furniture, including ash trays, a humidior and pictures for the wall, all for \$199.99. Hell, I was there, and I figured I might as well go through with having a look at his pathetic problem.

“Nice place you have here, Mr. Foster,” I said. “And this is your charming wife?”

A skinny, shrewish-looking woman smiled up at me vacuously. She wore a faded housecoat figured with a fox-hunting scene. The print was at war with the slip cover of the chair, and I had to squint to separate her features from the clash about her. “A pleasure, Mrs. Foster,” I said. She was surrounded by underwear and socks to be mended, and Herbert said her name was Alma, which seemed entirely possible.

“And this is the young master,” I said. “Bright little chap. Believe he favors his father.” The two-year-old wiped his grubby hands on my trousers, snuffled, and padded off toward the piano. He stationed himself at the upper end of the keyboard, and hammered on the highest note for one minute, then two, then three.

“Musical—like his father,” Alma said.

“You play, do you, Mr. Foster?”

“Classical,” Herbert said. I took my first good look at him. He was lightly built, with the round, freckled face and big teeth I usually associate with a show-off or wise guy. It was hard to believe that he had settled for so plain a wife, or that he could be as fond of family life as he seemed. It may have been that I only imagined a look of quiet desperation in his eyes.

“Shouldn’t you be getting on to your meeting, dear?” Herbert said.

“It was called off at the last minute.”

“Now, about your portfolio—” I began.

Herbert looked rattled. “How’s that?”

“Your portfolio—your securities.”

“Yes, well, I think we’d better talk in the bedroom. It’s quieter in there.”

Alma put down her sewing. “What securities?”

“The bonds, dear. The government bonds.”

“Now, Herbert, you’re not going to cash them in.”

“No, Alma, just want to talk them over.”

“I see,” I said tentatively. “Uh—approximately how much in government bonds?”

“Three hundred and fifty dollars,” Alma said proudly.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t see any need for going into the bedroom to talk. My advice, and I give it free, is to hang on to your nest egg until it matures. And now, if you’ll let me phone a cab—”

“Please,” Herbert said, standing in the bedroom door, “there are a couple of other things I’d like to discuss.”

“What?” Alma said.

“Oh, long-range investment planning,” Herbert said vaguely.

“We could use a little short-range planning for next month’s grocery bill.”

“Please,” Herbert said to me again.

I shrugged and followed him into the bedroom. He closed the door behind me. I sat on the edge of the bed and watched him open a little door in the wall, which bared the pipes servicing the bathroom. He slid his arm up into the wall, grunted, and pulled down an envelope.

“Oho,” I said apathetically, “so that’s where we’ve got the bonds, eh? Very clever. You needn’t have gone to that trouble, Mr. Foster. I have an idea what government bonds look like.”

“Alma,” he called.

“Yes, Herbert.”

“Will you start some coffee for us?”

“I don’t drink coffee at night,” I said.

“We have some from dinner,” Alma said.

“I can’t sleep if I touch it after supper,” I said.

“Fresh—we want some fresh,” Herbert said.

The chair springs creaked, and her reluctant footsteps faded into the kitchen.

“Here,” said Herbert, putting the envelope in my lap. “I don’t know anything about this business, and I guess I ought to have professional help.”

All right, so I’d give the poor guy a professional talk about his three hundred and fifty dollars in government bonds. “They’re the most conservative investment you can make. They haven’t the growth characteristics of many securities, and the return isn’t great, but they’re very safe. By all means hang onto them.” I stood up. “And now, if you’ll let me call a cab—”

“You haven’t looked at them.”

I sighed, and untwisted the red string holding the envelope shut. Nothing would do but that I admire the things. The bonds and a list of securities slid into my lap. I riffled through the bonds quickly, and then read the list slowly.

“Well?”

I put the list down on the faded bedspread. I composed myself. “Ummmm, uh-huh,” I said. “Do you mind telling me where the securities listed here came from?”

“Grandfather left them to me two years ago. The lawyers who handled the estate have them. They sent me that list.”

“Do you know what these stocks are worth?”

“They were appraised when I inherited them.” He told me the figure, and, to my bewilderment, he looked sheepish, even a little unhappy about it.

“They’ve gone up a little since then.”

“How much?”

“On today’s market—maybe they’re worth seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Foster. Sir.”

His expression didn’t change. My news moved him about as much as if I’d told him it’d been a chilly winter. He raised his eyebrows as Alma’s footsteps came back into the living room. “Shhhh!”

“She doesn’t know?”

“Lord, no!” He seemed to have surprised himself with his vehemence. “I mean the time isn’t ripe.”

“If you’ll let me have this list of securities, I’ll have our New York office give you a complete analysis and recommendations,” I whispered. “May I call you Herbert, sir?”

MY CLIENT, Herbert Foster, hadn’t had a new suit in three years; he had never owned more than one pair of shoes at a time. He worried about payments on his secondhand car, and ate tuna and cheese instead of meat, because meat was too expensive. His wife made her own clothes, and those of Herbert, Jr., and the curtains and slip covers—all cut from the same bargain bolt. The Fosters were going through hell, trying to choose between new tires or retreads for the car; and television was something they had to go two doors down the street to watch. Determinedly, they kept within the small salary Herbert made as a bookkeeper for a wholesale grocery house.

God knows it’s no disgrace to live that way, which is better than the way I live, but it was pretty disturbing to watch, knowing Herbert had an income, after taxes, of perhaps twenty thousand a year.

I had our securities analysts look over Foster’s holdings, and report on the stocks’ growth possibilities, prospective earnings, the effects of war and peace, inflation and deflation, and so on. The report ran to twenty pages, a record for any of my clients. Usually, the reports (Continued on page 12) are bound in Manila covers. Herbert’s was done up in red leatherette.

It arrived at my place on a Saturday afternoon, and I called up Herbert to ask if I could bring it out. I had exciting news for him. My by-eye estimate of the values had been off, and his portfolio, as of that day, was worth close to eight hundred and fifty thousand.

“I’ve got the analysis and recommendations,” I said, “and things look good, Mr. Foster—very good. You need a little diversification here and there, and maybe more emphasis on growth, but—”

“Just go ahead and do whatever needs to be done,” he said.

“When could we talk about this? It’s something we ought to go over together, certainly. Tonight would be fine with me.”

“I work tonight.”

“Overtime at the wholesale house?”

“Another job—in a restaurant. Work Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.”

I rolled my eyes. The man had maybe seventy-five dollars a day coming in from his securities, and he worked three nights a week to make ends meet! “Monday?”

“Play organ for choir practice at the church.”

“Tuesday?”

“Volunteer Fire Department drill.”

“Wednesday?”

“Play piano for folk dancing at the church.”

“Thursday?”

“Movie night for Alma and me.”

“When, then?”

“You go ahead and do whatever needs to be done.”

“Don’t you want to be in on what I’m doing?”

“Do I have to be?”

“I’d feel better if you were.”

“All right, Tuesday noon, lunch.”

“Fine with me. Maybe you’d better have a good look at this report before then, so you can have questions ready.”

He sounded annoyed. “Okay, okay, okay. I’ll be here tonight until nine. Drop it off before then.”

“One more thing, Herbert.” I’d saved the kicker for last. “I was way off about what the stocks are worth. They’re now up to about eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Um.”

“I said, you’re about a hundred thousand dollars richer than you thought!”

“Uh-huh. Well, you just go ahead and do whatever needs to be done.”

“Yes, sir.” The phone was dead.

I WAS delayed by other business, and I didn’t get out to the Fosters’ until quarter of ten. Herbert was gone. Alma answered the door. and. to my surprise, she asked for the report, which I was hiding under my coat.

“Herbert said I wasn’t supposed to look at it,” she said, “so you don’t need to worry about me peeking.”

“Herbert told you about this?” I said carefully.

“Yes. He said it’s confidential reports on stocks you want to sell him.”

“Yes, uh-huh—well, if he said to leave it with you, here it is.”

“He told me he had to promise you not to let anybody look at it.”

“Mmm? Oh, yes, yes. Sorry, company rules.”

She was a shade hostile. “I’ll tell you one thing without looking at any reports, and that is he’s not going to cash those bonds to buy any stocks with.”

“I’d be the last one to recommend that, Mrs. Foster.”

“Then why do you keep after him?”

“He may be a good customer at a later date.” I looked at my hands, which I realized had become ink-stained on the earlier call. “I wonder if I might wash up?”

Reluctantly, she let me in, keeping as far away from me as the modest floor plan would permit.

As I washed up, I thought of the list of securities Herbert had taken from between the plasterboard walls. Those securities meant winters in Florida, filet mignon and twelve-year-old bourbon, Jaguars, silk underwear and handmade shoes, a trip around the world. . . . Name it Herbert Foster could have it. I sighed heavily. The

soap in the Foster soap dish was mottled and dingy—a dozen little chips moistened and pressed together to make a new bar.

I thanked Alma, and started to leave. On my way out. I paused by the mantel to look at a small tinted photograph. “Good picture of you,” I said. A feeble effort at public relations. “I like that.”

“Everybody says that. It isn’t me; it’s Herbert’s mother.”

“Amazing likeness.” And it was. Herbert had married a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad. “And this picture is his father?”

“My father. We don’t want a picture of his father.”

This looked like a sore point that might prove informative. “Herbert is such a wonderful person, his father must have been wonderful, too, eh?”

“He deserted his wife and child. That’s how wonderful he was. You’ll be smart not to mention him to Herbert.”

“Sorry. Everything good about Herbert comes from his mother?”

“She was a saint. She taught Herbert to be decent and respectable and God-fearing.” Alma was a little grim about it.

“Was she musical, too?”

“He gets that from his father. But what he does with it is something quite different. His taste in music is his mother’s—the classics.”

“His father was a jazz man, I take it?” I hinted.

“He preferred playing piano in dives, and breathing smoke and drinking gin, to his wife and child and home and job. Herbert’s mother finally said he had to choose one life or the other.”

I nodded sympathetically. Maybe Herbert looked on his fortune as filthy, untouchable. since it came from his father’s side of the family. “This grandfather of Herbert’s, who died two years ago—?”

“He supported Herbert and his mother after his son deserted them. Herbert worshiped him.” She shook her head sadly. “He was penniless when he died.”

“What a shame.”

“I’d so hoped he would leave us a little something, so Herbert wouldn’t have to work week ends.”

WE WERE trying to talk above the clatter, tinkle and crash of the cafeteria where he ate every day. The lunch was on me—or on my expense account— and I’d picked up his check for eighty-seven cents. I said, “Now, Herbert, before we go any further, we’d better decide what you want from your investments: growth or

income.” It was a cliché of the counseling business. God knows what he wanted from the securities. It didn’t seem to be what everybody else wanted—money.

“Whatever you say,” Herbert said absently. He was upset about something, and not paying much attention to me.

“Herbert—look, you’ve got to face this thing. You’re a rich man. You’ve got to concentrate on making the most of your holdings.”

“That’s why I called you. I want you to concentrate. I want you to run things for me, so I won’t have to bother with the deposits and proxies and taxes. Don’t trouble me with it at all.”

“Your lawyers have been banking the dividends, eh?”

“Most of them. Took out thirty-two dollars for Christmas, and gave a hundred to the church.”

“So what’s your balance?”

He handed me the deposit book.

“Not bad,” I said. Despite his Christmas splurge and largess toward the church, he’d managed to salt away \$50,227.33. “May I ask what a man with a balance like that can be blue about?”

“Got bawled out at work again.”

“Buy the place and burn it down,” I suggested.

“I could, couldn’t I?” A wild look came into his eyes, then disappeared.

“Herbert, you can do anything your heart desires.”

“Oh, I suppose so. It’s all in the way you look at it.”

I leaned forward. “How do you look at it, Herbert?”

“I think every man, for his own self-respect, should earn what he lives on.”

“But, Herbert—”

“I have a wonderful wife and child, a nice house for them, and a car. And I’ve earned every penny of the way. I’m living up to the full measure of my responsibilities. I’m proud to say I’m everything my mother wanted me to be, and nothing my father was.”

“Do you mind my asking what your father was?”

“I don’t enjoy talking about him. Home and family meant nothing to him. His real love was for low-down music and honky-tonks, and for the trash in them.”

“Was he a good musician, do you think?”

“Good?” For an instant, there was excitement in his voice, and he tensed, as though he were going to make an important point. But he relaxed again. “Good?” he repeated, flatly this time. “Yes, in a crude way, I suppose he was passable— technically, that is.”

“And that much you inherited from him.”

“His wrists and hands, maybe. God help me if there’s any more of him in me.”

“You’ve got his love of music, too.”

“I love music, but I’d never let it get like dope to me!” he said, with more force than seemed necessary.

“Uh-huh. Well—”

“Never!”

“Beg your pardon?”

His eyes were wide. “I said I’ll never let music get like dope to me. It’s important to me, but I’m master of it, and not the other way around.”

APPARENTLY it was a treacherous subject, so I switched back to the matter of his finances. “Yes, well, now about your portfolio again: just what use do you expect to make of it?”

“Use some of it for Alma’s and my old age; leave most of it to the boy.” ”

“The least you can do is take enough out of the kitty to let you out of working week ends.”

He stood up suddenly. “Look. I want you to handle my securities, not my life. If you can’t do one without the other, I’ll find someone who can.”

“Please, Herbert, Mr. Foster. I’m sorry, sir. I was only trying to get the whole picture for planning.”

He sat down, red-faced. “All right then, respect my convictions. I want to make my own way. If I have to hold a second job to make ends meet, then that’s my cross to bear.”

“Sure, sure, certainly. And you’re dead right, Herbert. I respect you for it.” I thought he belonged in the bughouse for it. “You leave everything to me from now on. I’ll invest those dividends and run the whole show.” As I puzzled over Herbert, I glanced at a passing blonde. Herbert said something I missed. “What was that, Herbert?”

“I said, ‘If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee.’ ”

I laughed appreciatively, then cut it short. Herbert was deadly serious. "Well, pretty soon you'll have the car paid for, Collier's for September 8, 1951 and then you can take a well-earned rest on the week ends. And you'll really have something to be proud of, eh? Earned the whole car by the sweat of your brow, right down to the tip of the exhaust pipe."

"One more payment."

"Then by-by, restaurant."

"There'll still be Alma's birthday present to pay for. I'm getting her television."

"Going to earn that, too, are you?"

"Think how much more meaningful it will be as a gift, if I do."

"Yes, sir, and it'll give her something to do on week ends, too."

"If I have to work week ends for twenty-eight more months, God knows it's little enough to do for her."

If the stock market kept doing what it had been doing for the past three years, Herbert would be a millionaire just about the time he made the last payment on Alma's birthday present. "Fine."

"I love my family," Herbert said earnestly.

"I'm sure you do."

"And I wouldn't trade the life I've got for anything."

"I can certainly see why." I suddenly had the impression that he was arguing with me, that it was important to him that I be convinced.

"When I consider what my father was, and then see the life I've made for myself, it's the biggest thrill in all my experience."

A very small thrill could qualify for the biggest in Herbert's experience, I thought. "I envy you. It must be gratifying— it is."

"Gratifying," he repeated determinedly. "It is, it is, it is."

MY FIRM began managing Herbert's portfolio, converting some of the slower-moving securities into more lucrative ones, investing the accumulated dividends, diversifying his holdings so he'd be in better shape to weather economic shifts—and in general making his fortune altogether shipshape. A sound portfolio is a tiling of beauty in its way, aside from its cash value. Putting one together is a creative act, if done right, with solid major themes of industrials, rails and utilities, and with the lighter, more exciting themes of electronics, frozen foods, magic drugs, oil and gas, aviation and other more speculative items. Herbert's portfolio was our

masterpiece. I was thrilled and proud of what the firm had done, and not being able to show it off, even to him, was depressing.

It was too much for me, and I decided to engineer a coincidence. I would find out in which restaurant Herbert worked, and then drop in, like any other citizen, for something to eat. I would happen to have a report on his overhauled portfolio with me.

I telephoned Alma, who told me the name of the place, one I'd never heard of. Herbert hadn't wanted to talk about the place, so I gathered that it was pretty grim —as he said, his cross to bear.

It was worse than I'd expected: tough, brassy, dark and noisy. Herbert had picked one hell of a place, indeed, to do penance for a wayward father, or to demonstrate his gratitude to his wife, or to maintain his self-respect by earning his own way— or to do whatever it was he was doing there.

I elbowed my way between bored-looking women and race-track types to the bar. I had to shout at the bartender to be heard. When I did get through to him, he yelled back that he'd never heard of no Herbert Foster. Herbert, then, was about as minor an employee as there was in the establishment. He was probably doing something greasy in the kitchen or basement. Typical.

In the kitchen, a crone was making questionable-looking hamburgers, and nipping at a quart of beer.

"I'm looking for Herbert Foster."

"Ain' no damn' Herbert Foster in here."

"In the basement?"

"Ain' no damn' basement."

"Ever hear of Herbert Foster?"

"Ain' never heard of no damn' Herbert Foster."

"Thanks."

I sat in a booth to think it over. Herbert had apparently picked the joint out of a telephone book, and told Alma it was where he spent his week-end evenings. In a way, it made me feel better, because it began to look as though Herbert maybe had better reasons than he'd given me for letting eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars get musty. I remembered that every time I'd mentioned his giving up the week-end job, he'd reacted like a man hearing a dentist tune up his drill. I saw it now: the minute he let Alma know he was rich, he'd lose his excuse for getting away from her on week ends.

But what was it that was worth more to Herbert than eight hundred and fifty thousand? Binges? Dope? Women? I sighed, and admitted I was kidding myself, that I was no closer to the answer than I'd ever been. Moral turpitude on Herbert's part was inconceivable. Whatever he was up to, it had to be for a good cause.

His mother had done such a thorough job on him, and he was so awfully ashamed of his father's failings, that I was sure he couldn't operate any other way but righteously. I gave up on the puzzle, and ordered a nightcap.

And then Herbert Foster, looking drab and hunted, picked his way through the crowd. His expression was one of disapproval, of a holy man in Babylon. He was oddly stiff-necked and held his arms at his sides as he pointedly kept from brushing against anyone or from meeting any of the gazes that fell upon him. There was no question that being in the place was absolute, humiliating hell for him.

I called to him, but he paid no attention. There was no communicating with him. Herbert was in a near coma of see-no-evil, speak-no-evil, hear-no-evil.

The crowd in the rear parted for him, and I expected to see Herbert go into a dark corner for a broom or a mop. But a light flashed on at the far end of the aisle the crowd made for him, and a tiny white piano sparkled there like jewelry. The bartender set a drink on the piano, and went back to his post.

Herbert dusted off the piano bench with his handkerchief, and sat down gingerly. He took a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighted it. And then the cigarette started to droop slowly from his lips; and, as it drooped, Herbert hunched over the keyboard and his eyes narrowed as though he were focusing on something beautiful on a faraway horizon.

Startlingly, Herbert Foster disappeared. In his place sat an excited stranger, his hands poised like claws. Suddenly he struck, and a spasm of dirty, low-down, gorgeous jazz shook the air, a hot wraith of the twenties.

LATE that night I went over my masterpiece, the portfolio of Herbert Foster, alias "Firehouse" Harris. I hadn't bothered Firehouse with it or with myself.

In a week or so, there would be a juicy melon from one of his steel companies. Three of his oil stocks were paying extra dividends. The farm machinery company in which he owned five thousand shares was about to offer him rights worth three dollars apiece.

Thanks to me and my company and an economy in full bloom, Herbert was about to be several thousand dollars richer than he'd been a month before. I had a right to be proud, but my triumph—except for the commission—was gall and wormwood.

Nobody could do anything for Herbert.

Herbert already had what he wanted, long before the inheritance or I intruded. He had the respectability his mother had hammered into him. But just as priceless as that was an income not quite big enough to go around. It left him no alternative but—in the holy names of wife, child and home—to play piano in a dive, and breathe smoke and drink gin, to be Firehouse Harris, his father's son, three nights out of seven. THE END