

## CONTENTS

## NOVELETTES

COOL CAT <i>by Hal Ellson</i> . . . . .	63
SAUCE FOR THE GANDER, A Clancy Ross Novelette <i>by Richard Deming</i> . . . . .	13
BLOCK PARTY <i>by Sam Merwin, Jr.</i> . . . . .	1

## SHORT STORIES

SLEEP WITHOUT DREAMS, A Johnny Liddell Story <i>by Frank Kane</i> . . . . .	127
TERROR IN THE NIGHT <i>by Robert Bloch</i> . . . . .	85
FOG <i>by Gil Brewer</i> . . . . .	50
HANDY MAN <i>by Fletcher Flora</i> . . . . .	90
THEY'RE CHASING US <i>by Herbert D. Kastle</i> . . . . .	98
KILLER <i>by William Logan</i> . . . . .	115
SHOT <i>by Roy Carroll</i> . . . . .	140
DEAD SOLDIER <i>by Jack Sword</i> . . . . .	40
JOB WITH A FUTURE <i>by Richard Welles</i> . . . . .	122
THE WATCHERS <i>by Wally Hunter</i> . . . . .	110
MARTY <i>by Robert S. Swensen</i> . . . . .	58

## FEATURE

CONTEST WINNER: YOU, DETECTIVE No. 6 . . . . .	97
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MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*R. E. DECKER, *General Manager*WALTER SHMIDT, *Editorial Director*N. F. KING, *Managing Editor*CHARLES W. ADAMS, *Art Director*G. F. ST. JOHN, *Associate Editor*GERALD ADAMS, *Art Assistant*JOE SHORE, *Advertising Rep.*

MANHUNT VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2, February, 1956. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of the St. John Publishing Co.), 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. The entire contents of this issue are copyrighted 1955 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A.



*If she'd only left me alone, I'd still be okay. I wouldn't be where I am now . . .*

# Job with a Future

BY RICHARD WELLES

sure about that but I do know one thing — he had no squawk coming. That much I know for sure. I'd been working for him in the store ever since I quit school last year and he had no reason to beef. I did just about everything in the store, worked behind the counter, made deliveries and stuff like that. I worked just as hard as he did, maybe harder, and all I got for it was a lousy thirty bucks a week. Actually I was making nothing at all — the old lady used to cop half of the thirty every week for my board.

EVERYTHING would have been all right if only the old lady had left me alone. But no, she couldn't do that. She had to keep nagging and yelling at me, night and day, until I don't know what.

Maybe it was old man Snyder who started the whole thing. I'm not

Snyder is the kind who's never satisfied with anything or anybody and it seems to me that he always has to have his big mouth open. I don't know why but he just *has* to. Well,

this one morning I come into work and I'm late. I'd been to a party the night before and I'm not feeling so hot, so, when he starts shooting off his mouth, I say, "Nuts to you, fat man," and I quit.

He's plenty sore and, just to show me what a regular bastard he can be, he gets on the phone and calls my old lady. He tells her he fired me because a lot of his stock has disappeared since I started working for him. I don't know anything about him phoning cause I've already left the store but as soon as I get home the old lady starts in on me. She gives me hell and plenty of it. She knows that Snyder is a damn liar but you can bet that that's not what's bothering her. All she cares about is her lousy fifteen bucks, and she lets me know about it, too. I tell her not to worry, that I'm getting a better job anyhow, and she says that I'd damn well better hurry up about it.

The next day I make the rounds of a few places where I hear they've been hiring but they all hit me with the same thing — references. That's really funny. If I know Snyder he won't give me a reference to hell. I don't worry too much at first, though, but then a week goes by and I haven't even got the smell of a job. That's still not so bad, but every night when I go home the same thing starts all over again. She tells me that I'm a lousy bum just like my father was, and she says I'll wind up like him, too — dying broke in a

gutter. She doesn't have to talk to me like that. She knows I'm trying. But she just doesn't give a damn.

Well, I'm down to my last two bucks and I decide to spend it on an *employment wanted* ad in the paper. I get Jake, who lives across the hall, to help me write it out. It runs for three days in the paper and it reads: *Ambitious youth 17, wants position with a future — anything considered. Box 374.* The ad looks pretty nice in the paper but the results it brings are just nothing, so it's beginning to look like I'm never going to find a job.

I guess maybe that's why I listen so carefully when Fats McGregor starts talking to me. Fats is three years older than me and he's got quite a reputation around town. He's one guy it pays to stay on good terms with, and one of the reasons is that switch-blade that he carries around with him. He never bothers with me much, except maybe to nod hello once in a while, but, this night, I'm walking home and he calls me over to where he's sitting in a '52 Ford.

"Hi, Fats," I say. "Whose car?"

"It's mine, Tommy. You like?"

I tell him it's real great and he says that it's not bad but that he's going to trade it in on a new model soon. I tell him that that's swell and I say that he must be doing all right for himself.

"Well, Tommy, I can't complain. But what about you? You look pretty damn sad, kid. What is it,

your broad leave you hanging in the air or something?"

"No," I tell him. "It's just that I quit my job and they're not so easy to find right now."

His lips pull back into a grin that reveals a mouthful of bad teeth and he shakes his head at me.

"Hell, kid, that's the last thing you got to worry about. Come on. I'll buy you a drink."

I hop in beside him and we drive over to Big Al's. On the way over we get talking and I tell him how the old lady is giving me a rough time and all. He thinks the whole thing is as funny as hell but, even though I don't like his laughing, I know better than to say anything about it. Big Al's is over on Bleecker Street and I'd been there a dozen times before, but, when we go in this time, Fats steers me right past the bar to the back. There's a door there that I'd never seen before and Fats takes a key from his pocket and unlocks it. We both walk in and he reaches out and snaps on a light.

Man, what a setup! There are chairs all around the room and a big sofa pushed over against the wall. In the middle of the room there's a table with a radio sitting on it along with a deck of cards. Over in one corner is a cupboard and Fats goes over to it and takes out two glasses and a fifth of whisky. He pours us each a drink and comes over and sits beside me on the sofa, putting the bottle on the floor in front of us.

"Well, Tommy, do you like it? All the comforts of home, hey?"

"Jesus!" I say. "This is all right. You live here, Fats?"

"No," he tells me. "I just entertain my friends here, you know what I mean? Me and Al have kind of an understanding. I've done him a few favors, see, and he lets me use this place whenever I want. It comes in handy sometimes."

The whisky is real stuff, nothing like the cheap blend the gang drinks. It goes down just like Coke but it's got a real kick to it. We sit around and drink some more and Fats asks me if I still hang around with the same guys. I tell him no, that I haven't seen them for a long time and he says that I'm smart, because they're just punks anyway. Then he asks what I'm planning on doing and, when I tell him I'll keep hunting around for a job, he starts to laugh again. I guess I had a lot more to drink than I figured. I turn to him and ask what's so goddamned funny. I sit there, hoping like hell that I won't have to go with him, but if he's hot he doesn't show it. Instead he says that a friend of his might be able to give me a job, and he asks if I can drive. I tell him I can, and I ask what kind of job.

"Nothing you can't handle, kid. He just hits gas stations and small stores that stay open late. You can make yourself a bundle, Tommy. All you have to do is drive. Well, kid, what about it?"

I don't know what to say. I mean,

I've been around with the gang and all, but this is different. I sit there, saying nothing for a moment, and then I take a big gulp of whisky and turn to Fats.

"Okay." I say. "Who's your friend?"

He starts to laugh like hell at that, and he goes over to the cupboard again and takes something. When he turns around I can see that it's a gun.

"Come on, kid," he says. "Let's go to work."

We go out and hop into the car and start out of town. We stop once at a puddle and Fats gets out and smears the car's plates with mud. Then we cruise around a bit and finally we spot this gas station that looks pretty good. We pull the car up about fifty feet past it and I slide over behind the wheel when Fats gets out.

"Keep the motor running, kid. This won't take long."

He's gone, and suddenly I'm sweating all over. I'm scared as hell and I want out real bad. I'm so scared, my teeth are slamming against each other, but I'm not going to chicken out now. I just shut my eyes and grab the wheel hard. It seems like a year but finally I feel a bump as he jumps in beside me. I put my foot on the gas and we beat it out of there fast. Fats isn't worrying about anything. He's sitting there, laughing to himself, and counting a real bundle of money.

"You should have seen it, kid. It was a cinch. One of the punks tried

to get hard, so I split his head for him."

"How much did we get?" I ask.

He tells me: a hundred and forty bucks. I'm wondering how much I'll get when he reaches over and stuffs a pile of dough into my pocket.

"There, kid. Seventy bucks. That's more than Snyder ever paid you, huh?"

And the old lady told me I'd be like my father — dying broke, in a gutter! But I play it smart. "That's too much, Fats," I say. "All I did was drive."

"Don't be stupid, kid; that's the way we split. Don't worry. You've got the tough part. How'd you feel?"

I tell him I was scared as hell and he says not to let it worry me. We head back into town after we clean off the license plates, and we're cutting back to Big Al's when it happens. This crazy old guy jumps right in front of us and, before I can stop, we slam him about fifty feet. Fats is yelling at me to get going but, just as we start moving again, I hear the siren behind us.

We hit the corner fast and tear through the streets, but the cops stay right with us. Fats is screaming at the cops like they can hear him, and he's waving the gun back and forth, wanting like hell to use it. Then Fats is quiet, suddenly, and the next thing I know he's sprawled all over me. I look down and I see the little hole in his neck.

Then two things happen at once.

I feel a pain in my shoulder, like I was burnt or something. At the same time I look into the mirror and I see the cruiser take the sidewalk and smack hard into a brick wall.

An alley comes up and I turn in fast and get out. I'm real scared, but I don't forget Fats' money or his gun. It's dark, dark as hell, and I take off, over the fences, putting plenty of distance between me and the alley. Finally I fall off this fence and I know I can't go any farther. There's a garage at the end of the

yard and I stagger down to it and get in through the little door in the back. Inside, there's a car and I open the front door and fall in across the seat. My jacket's soaked through with blood and I know I'm hurt pretty bad. I kind of want to cry but I'm not going to — not now.

If she'd only left me alone I would have been all right. I'm dying now and it's all her fault. I don't really care, though. I showed her — I showed her she was wrong. I'm not in a gutter, and I'm not broke neither.

