

LITTLE NOOLEY'S BLUES

ing that as he watched them lower Buck Manos into the ground, and nothing seemed to be right at all. First there was Buck, blowing his big raucous trombone just like always, his face red, his cheeks puffed out, rocking back and forth in his chair with the beat. And then, after the job he goes chasing uptown after some mama and the next thing you know he steps out into the street in front of a car and he's dead.

And now there was just the man reading from his little book, hurrying it up maybe because it was cold and gray out

A STORY

BY FREEMAN PHILLIPS

BUCK MANOS used to say, "Man, this here's the kind of cat that likes his women big and his music lively. I been like that since the day I was born and that's how I'm gonna be 'till I die. I'm gonna have the biggest funeral you ever *did* see, with sixteen high steppin' mamas a-leadin' the parade down State Street, and a Dixie band jammin' along right behind. . . . And me, I'll set up in that old pine box, and blow me a mess of tailgate trombone right along with 'em—"

Little Nooley Jackson, the trumpet player, was remember-

there at 9:30 in the morning with the wind blowing in off the river.

And Buck's old woman, shivering a little in her thin fur coat, her face pinched with that angry look she always had, like she was still sore at Buck for ever marrying her in the first place, and for being a trombone man instead of, maybe, a grocery clerk, and for going off

and getting himself killed, leaving her all the grief and expense. She wept a little in a thin, fretful way, looking past the little group of jazz men, not seeing them, sore at them too, like she maybe still was at Buck.

Nooley, in a gray overcoat and the old shiny tuxedo that was his work uniform, stood a little apart from the rest, leaning wearily against the iron fence that separated the cemetery from the rest of the world. He hadn't been to bed yet, the job didn't end until four. And there was no fire left in him from the gin he'd drunk during the night, only a vague, tired sadness and a rubbery feeling in his knees.

The service was over quickly and everyone was walking away. Nooley, his face deeply troubled, fell into step beside Eddie Street, the guitar man. "What do you think, papa?" he said. "You're hip on this stuff. Tell me."

"Tell you what?" Eddie Street demanded. He was tall and reedy slim with sleek yellow hair and a long, bony, literal face. "What are you talking about?" He took a stick of gum from his pocket, unwrapped it and doubled it into his mouth.

"Buck," Nooley said, musing. "Seems like they should'a

done more for old Buck. It don't seem right somehow, just layin' him away like that —"

Eddie shrugged. "A cat's six feet under, he's past frettin' on how he got down there," he said, and the hard muscles of his face knotted and unknotted as he chewed.

Nooley frowned. That wasn't the point, he knew. But just what the point was, was too cloudy and deep in his mind to put words to. "He played fine horn, man," he said, as though that should have expressed everything. "That's the call, ain't it — a cat plays like he knows is right? Remember how he used to come slidin' up into the break in *Shimmy Sha'wabble*?" And then, as sad as he felt, he couldn't help it, he had to smile and sing a little of how Buck used to play. "Taaaaaaara tata tata da —"

Eddie chewed angrily and lengthened his stride, like he wanted to get away from Nooley.

"— and the way he used to kick the beat in the last chorus of *Riverboat*!" Nooley went on urgently. "Slidin' way down in the low notes so's he was like to go on through the floor! Man!" he laughed. "There ain't many cats around these days can blow a horn like old Buck done."

"Sure, papa, sure," Eddie

said. But from his voice you could tell he was just impatient and wishing Nooley would shut up.

NOOLEY SIGHED and dug his hands deep into his coat pockets. He was a small man, and slight. At first glance you could almost take him for a boy with his smooth, round face. But it was a waxy kind of smoothness, with tiny, deep-etched wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth. The trouble in his face increased as he struggled unfamiliarly with his thoughts: A cat blows good all his life, a cat blows like he knows is right and then when he jumps off — But, maybe it don't matter. Maybe it's like Eddie says. A cat's six feet under it don't matter no more. . . . He wished he knew, but all that came into his head was music. Good blues music, but it didn't tell him anything and he shook his head to make it stop.

"Listen," he said to Eddie. "Remember how Buck used to say, how when he dies he's gonna have —"

"Man, I'm about froze to death!" It was Orvie Coombes, the chubby little clarinet man from Chi who'd played alongside Tesch many years ago. He came between them, making

cold noises with his lips. "That wind just cuts like a knife. Either you cats bring some cream?"

"Don't you ever bring none of your own?" Eddie snapped.

"Listen to that cat! I just wish I had a buck for every time you took the top off of my jug."

"You wouldn't be rich," Eddie said. And just like that they were off on their usual argument, just as if Buck had never laughed that big, chesty laugh of his and said, "I swear, if you two cats spent as much time playin' as you do a-fussin' and screechin' at each other, you'd likely have more money than Gawd and the President of the United States put together and be twice as famous."

Nooley fell behind and walked on sadly by himself. He reached into his inside pocket for his jug and took a long, speculative mouthful. And then the thought that had been in the back of his head all along came forward. It was: It might, just as easy, have been him instead of Buck lying already forgotten in the grave! So what good was a cat's trying and straining when it didn't count for nothing anyway? His shoulders sagged under the weight of that and it took nearly the entire contents of the bottle to carry him out of the

cemetery and the few blocks to the subway entrance.

He was back at his place an hour later. He tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come, and he spent the afternoon sitting alone in his room, thinking, playing over and over the few scratchy old records that Buck had made years ago.

Toward evening, when there was only about a half inch in the bottom of the jug, he talked to Buck a little, telling him, "Don't you fret, papa. As long as there's people likes to hear good jazz music they ain't gonna forget old Buck Manos." But he said it in a futile voice, not really believing it himself. He had forgotten to turn on the light and he sat in the thickening dusk of his room, his hands in his lap and his head down. Sleep caught up with him finally then, and he was still sitting so, but with his eyes shut, when Eddie Street hurried in at a little past nine.

Nooley felt rough hands shaking his shoulder, he opened his eyes and looked into Eddie's angry, frowning face.

"Wake up, papa, wake up! Man, what's the matter with you? You should have been dressed and on the job a half an hour ago."

Nello's on Seventh Avenue was long and narrow and dim, a

rosy light from behind the bar, a whiter glare from the bandstand, tables filling in the space in front of the band. The sign outside read: "Appearing Nightly, Eddie Street and the Chicago Seven." And just inside the door stood Nello, pulling his nose and scowling the way he did when business wasn't good. He turned a long hard look on Nooley and Eddie as they entered.

Eddie put the trumpet case into Nooley's hand and gave him a quick shove toward the bandstand, then he started toward Nello, his mouth and both hands going full speed.

Nooley shuffled unsteadily across the room, ignoring the amused, curious glances of the customers at the tables. He took his trumpet out and carelessly dropped the case over the bandstand rail. Orvie and the rest came filing up to the stand, grinning too, saying things like, "Havin' a little ball, man? Figurin' on takin' the night off?"

NOOLEY DIDN'T bother with them either. Swaying slightly on his feet, he fingered the valves and then raised the horn to blow a few warm-up notes. He tightened his lips and blew into the mouthpiece. The note he had been thinking

didn't come out. What came out really wasn't a note at all. He shook his head and tried again. There was only the sound of air passing through the horn. He swore under his breath. Damned cork must'a fell out of the water valve again. But when he looked, the water valve was all right. So was the rest of the horn — Crazy, papa! He shrugged and thought he would blow a scale. He raised the horn again and then he was looking around him with a frightened, bewildered look on his face. He didn't know how to play the scale! He couldn't even remember the first note!

Crazy, papa, crazy!

He blew again and again and again and all that came out was screechings and squealings like a kid picking up a horn for the first time, and he grew red and began to sweat and everybody was staring at him. Eddie came running over.

"F' Gawds sake, Nooley! What are you doin'? Quit messin' around and get up on that stand."

"There's something wrong, papa! It don't blow right."

"It don't blow right! You're flipped. Come on, now." He hurried the bewildered, protesting Nooley up on the stand, sat down himself and grabbed up his guitar. "Man, if we ain't

finished tonight then I don't know what! Le's play something. Quick. *Sugar*. That's a good tune. The boss always liked it."

Nooley started to rise from his chair. "I can't play, Eddie. I can't —"

"Sit down!" Eddie hissed. "You got the lead on the first chorus. You ready?"

"Papa, listen, I —"

"Forget it," Eddie said. "Let's go."

Nooley obediently brought the horn up to his lips as Eddie began a four bar intro. It was one of the tunes that he most liked to play. Not too fast, not too slow, pretty chords moving with a kind of lilt. He liked to lean back on the beat, relaxed and easy, and let the music ripple out of the bell, his soft, clear tone floating out over the whole room. But now his hands shook and he was tight inside. The first note — B natural — how did you get it? The first valve? The second? Both of them? He maybe would be all right if he could get started.

It was time! Panicky, he pressed down all three valves, took a deep breath and blew hard. The awful blast that came out made Nello pull his head around by the nose and Eddie's whisper was nearly a shout.

"Nooley! Take it, Orvie!

Nooley, you gone crazy?"

"I can't play, man. I forgot how!"

"You're loaded."

Nooley shook his head. His voice came out an agonized whisper. "I can't play, papa! What am I gonna do?"

Eddie swore under his breath and turned from him, slashed the pick angrily across the strings of the guitar. Nooley turned too, looked to the others, his eyes pleading. Orvie, Ray, Don — he saw amused annoyance in their faces, disgust maybe, impatience, like they were thinking: A joke's a joke, papa, but you just stopped being funny. Don shook his head and glared down at the piano keyboard.

Listen! Nooley wanted to tell them. Listen, can't you understand? Something's wrong! Something's happened to me!

And then Eddie's crisp whisper brought his head front again. "See what you done, now. Here comes the boss!"

Nello was walking toward them, his eyes narrowed, looking at Nooley. They were all looking at Nooley, he could feel it. He was surrounded by eyes, hostile eyes, scornful eyes. Well, papa, they said. Your move. What's it gonna be? Something like a sob came up in his throat. Eddie's whisper

buzzed insistently in his ear, prodding, demanding. Why couldn't they leave him in peace!

Suddenly, his horn tight under his arm, he was over the bandstand rail and dodging between tables, upsetting a chair, bumping the arm of a customer.

"Nooley, come back here!"

He slammed the door on Eddie's voice, and then he was out in the dark alley, tripping and stumbling over empty bottles and boxes and ash cans, out onto Seventh Avenue and he looked around wildly, then started swiftly up the broad sidewalk. He didn't stop running until he was safely in the subway entrance a block away. He stood there for a space, panting.

The panic began to recede then, anger coming up to take its place. Them cats, he thought. They're all so smart. They know it all cause all they know is a job and makin' a little loot — with Buck lyin' fresh in his grave.

Maybe that's what was wrong. Sure, papa. How can a man play in that place, with them cats all so smart, and a new trombone man setting up there where Buck had always sat?

He took out his jug, drained the last of it, dropped the bottle

into a waste can. He addressed his thoughts to Eddie. So long, papa. Little Nooley's goin' someplace where he can blow some trumpet. And don't come lookin' for me neither, cause I ain't gonna be there. . . . Then he turned and wavered down the steps toward the turnstiles.

NOOLEY GOT OFF the train at Fiftieth Street. He walked up to Fifty Second and stood outside one of the joints, listened to the soft, rhythmic shshing of brushes on cymbals and a tenor saxophone intimately nuzzling the chords of *Body and Soul*. It sounded good. Some of his old confidence came back momentarily and he went inside, asked to sit in.

"Sure, papa, glad to have you." The saxophone player, a portly, scholarly-looking colored man with gold rimmed glasses welcomed him politely on the stand. "You Nooley Jackson, ain't you? I heard you play, man. I'd like you to meet Slim, and George." They shook hands, smiling. "What would you like to do, papa? You call one."

"Anything at all," Nooley said. "It don't matter to me."

"Well — how about *Sunday*? You like that one?" Then the piano and drums started four bars to set the beat and the sax

man said, "You got the first one," and leaned back against the piano to listen.

Nooley held himself in so they wouldn't see how nervous he was inside. At the right time he shut his eyes and raised the horn. But when he went to blow, it happened just like it had happened before, and he suddenly felt like he was going to be sick, only he knew it wasn't anything that simple or easy to take care of.

The piano jumped hastily into the chorus and the three musicians were looking at him curiously. He had to explain, they'd understand. "I could play fine yesterday. Something happened —" His voice hardly seemed like his own, so high and querulous. "It was after Buck's funeral — you heard of Buck Manos, ain't you? Trombone man, played good, all the time . . ."

But the three faces didn't change. They smiled and looked at him blankly and his voice went higher and the words tumbled over each other and got mixed up in their hurry to get out. But he had to make them see. That was the most important thing in the world. "Man, that cat could really play. You should'a heard how he —"

And then, even as he was talking, the sax man was easing

him slowly off the stand toward the exit. "Sure papa, I know just how you feel. I'd like to hear all about it sometime. One of these days you come back and tell me the whole story."

And Nooley was out in the street again, dazed, swaying slightly on his feet, buffeted and pulled at by the swift current of people flowing around him.

It ain't natural! he cried out inside himself. A cat can't forget how to play. There's something crazy going on!

He began to stumble along with the restless crowd. Much of what happened during the next few hours of that night wasn't very clear. He wandered everywhere, the noise, the lights, the people and places merging together into a senseless, gin-hazy blur. Only a few little snatches and fragments stood out in his mind, sharper than the rest.

... A trumpet player in a joint on Forty-eighth Street. Nooley had listened to him play and it sounded good and honest. Sometimes you could tell what kind of a man a cat was by the way he blew a horn. He'd approached him hopefully after the set and tried to explain what had happened, asked him if he could maybe help him, show him how to blow again. But the trumpet

man had only laughed. "You kiddin' with that story, Jack? Listen, I got troubles enough of my own."

... A little place on Seventh Avenue, with a tall blonde sitting alone at the bar. All Nooley had wanted to do was talk to somebody. Somebody who'd listen and try to understand. But this big cat had come up, saying, "This guy bothering you, lady?" Then his hands were on Nooley's shoulders, shoving him. . . .

That was how it was all over, and the crazy pattern of the night lengthened out behind him with no help anywhere.

HE GOT ANOTHER jug and wandered uptown to Harlem. And then there was this tall cat with pegged pants and long hair and the kind of grin like he thought he was putting the whole world on. "Buck Manos?" he said. "Sure, I heard of Buck Manos."

Nooley looked up at him hopefully, although maybe he should have known better. That kind of cat with the jivey talk and the jivey way of playing that never came to nothing. But everything was screwy that night.

The tall cat winked off to one side to somebody, as if to say: Hold on to your sides, man.

This'll really be a killer. Then to Nooley: "Man, don't you know? That square is better off where he is. The style he blew went out with button shoes!"

The words flicked Nooley like a whip, shocking, stinging, and a great rage came up inside him, sweeping away all caution. He swung his fist at the tall cat's head and behind the blow was all his outrage and bitterness and protest against the world. It was a blow struck for Buck and for himself and for all those who were helpless and picked-on and sad, and for a moment he was nine feet tall with flames shooting out of his eyes. He tore into the world, shouting his anger, and the world staggered and fell back. There was a second's silence, broken by a shriek of high-pitched laughter from the other side of the room. Then somebody shouted, "Look out, he's got a knife!"

Nooley saw it, too. The slender steel blade in the tall cat's hand, razor-sharp, glittering. The tall cat's eyes, glittering too, with sudden hatred. The people around seeming to be frozen, stupidly, in their positions of a moment before, still holding their drinks, smiles remaining, forgotten, on their faces. Then the tall cat was getting to his feet again and simultaneously the place was filled

with movement and noise.

The next thing Nooley knew he was outside again, running, the sound of his footsteps ringing weirdly in the empty streets.

He ran long after there was any need to run, long after the tall cat had given up trying to catch him and turned back, feeling kind of queer and detached, like he was running in a dream. Finally, he slowed down to a shambling walk. The trumpet dangled limply from his fingers, knocking against his leg with every step.

He heard music from a late cellar joint across the street, automatically started toward it, and then stopped and turned away again. What's the good? he thought wearily. They all the same. They ain't no help there.

He wondered, then, where he would go. Back to Nello's? Where they were all too busy? Where they were all sore at him? His own place? With the record player and the unmade bed? He squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head.

Then where?

They ain't no place to go! When a cat's this low, they ain't nobody that cares, they ain't nobody can understand!

It was like that with Buck, it was like that with him. The thought made him feel a kind

of closeness to Buck and it occurred to him: There *was* one more place he could go. At least he could maybe find some peace there. . . .

It was still dark when he got to the cemetery, but dark with a grayish tinge. He made his way, stumbling, to the grave, and stood there for a space, staring down at the small headstone.

"Well, here's how, man," he said at last. He reached into his inside pocket for the jug, took a mouthful himself, and, with silent ceremony, poured some into the fresh earth about where he thought Buck's mouth would be. Then, too weary to stand any longer, he sat down beside the grave.

"It's been a long night, papa," he said. "A long and lonesome night." He looked away, then added thoughtfully. "For the both of us, I reckon."

He began to rock from side to side, crooning the blues in a high, wavering voice.

"It's a long, long way, when you travelin' all alone —

"Oh, it's a long way, papa, travelin' all alone —

"And the road gets longer, when you —" He broke off then and a half sob came up from his throat. "I never was much good at singin'," he said. "Ain't much good at nothin' no more.

Something crazy done happen to me tonight."

He began to tell Buck about it then, not so much because he wanted to as that he couldn't help it. First how it had been at Nello's, and how, after that, he'd been running around all over, looking, trying to figure out, the fight, the tall cat with the knife. All of it, spilling from his lips in a dull monotone.

"And, it wasn't none of it any good," he finished. He slumped back against the stone. "Little Nooley can't play no more music. He forgot how."

But, even then, the music was inside him, running through his mind the way it always did. And the three middle fingers of his right hand, like they'd done thousands of times before, were moving, automatically pressing down imaginary valves, fingering the notes he was thinking. But it was a long time before he realized what his fingers were doing. He stopped then and looked down, wondering, at his hand.

Crazy! he thought. Slowly, without a sound, he picked up the trumpet, put his fingers on the valves. Was he imagining or did it feel right again?

He was aware, in some far-away corner of his mind, of the sound of the car pulling up at the curb. A rough grinding like

the ancient touring car Eddie had sometimes. He paid no attention to it, nor to the angry whisper from outside the fence. "Nooley! Is that you in there? Cripes, we're chasin' around all over town and here he sits in the graveyard. Nooley! Gawd, he must be stoned. Orvie, Ross, one of you cats that's still sober enough, come out here and give me a hand —"

NOOLEY RAISED the horn to his lips and he got a feeling like a wall inside him was crumbling down and washing away. He blew softly into it, and then he knew for sure. For a moment the immensity of it held him speechless, then he said softly to Buck, "I can't do nothin' about no parade, papa. I can't get you no band. But at least you know little Nooley ain't forgot."

He closed his eyes and leaned back, began to play the blues, hesitant, fumbling over the first few notes and then surer and stronger.

Eddie came over the fence first, swearing and grunting. Orvie, a second later, slipping, giggling a little to himself. Ross Newcombe, the new trombone man, followed him over. Eddie was hastily brushing the dirt off his trousers.

But to Nooley, there was only

the music, simple and holy almost, filled with all the things that he could never say any other way. And he was sure that somewhere Buck was hearing it.

Eddie, his jaw set and angry, started toward him, the other two just behind. "Gawd!" he muttered. "Blowin' the blues over a cat's grave as if he's —" But he didn't finish what he'd started to say. He broke off, frowning a little, and listened to the music coming out of Nooley's horn.

When he turned around to the others a moment later there was a change in his face. For once the matter-of-fact certainty was gone, leaving in its place a sort of wondering. Orvie had caught it too, and Ross and those outside. They stood still, reverent, listening to Nooley.

And then, hastily, Orvie was fitting together the parts of his clarinet, and the ones outside were getting the instruments out of the car, handing them through the bars, over the top, climbing over themselves.

Orvie's clarinet fluttered in softly, found the key and came out high and sweet above the trumpet. The others came in one by one, Eddie, Marty, Ross, Ray Bone, the drummer, using Eddie's guitar case for a snare, patting out the beat with his brushes.

They played one chorus and then another. Then, without thinking why, Nooley led them into the break like he always used to do, chopped it off short for the trombone solo.

It was the way Buck had always liked to do it. A sharp break in the last bar and he'd come sliding up from the bottom into his chorus. But he did it different this time.

From right among them, although exactly where you couldn't say, they all heard that big, raucous tone, jumping into the break, doubling the tempo, blaring a startling four bar ca-

denza into the night!

A rejoicing shout came from Nooley. He answered the trombone with four more bars, high and wild, from his trumpet. Ray Bone pounded out a solo on the guitar case, his lips moving with the syncopated beats. And then they were all in together, rocking with the gay, lively New Orleans music like Buck had liked best to do. *Sensation, Jazz Band Ball, Riverboat Shuffle!* — And the way Nooley's horn kicked and Ray Bone lay down the beat on the guitar case, it seemed like even the tombstones would have to get up and stomp around.

The Editors

Introduce . . .

IT IS GENERALLY recognized that jazz is one of the few authentic American art forms. But old time jazz, as originally played by the Negroes in New Orleans, has been exploited in our culture. The music manufacturers have stolen and distorted the old tunes, and many of the real musicians have been allowed to die broke and almost forgotten.

The folkways of the jazz musician form a curious segment of American life. The jazz world has its own way of thinking, feeling, acting, and even a language of its own. When the **MERCURY** editors came across **Freeman Phillips'** story, "Little Nooley's Blues," we wondered how the author got his special knowledge of this world. We discovered that Freeman Phillips is a trumpet player turned writer, and that he was one of many younger musicians who learned the New Orleans idiom

from the old time jazz men.

Phillips, who is twenty-nine years old, started to write three years ago, and this is his first published story. He gave up the music after the war, when he was a glider trooper in the ETO. He lives in San Francisco now, but he grew up in New York City, learned the trumpet while in high school, and started to play jazz professionally when he was about sixteen. During the next five years he lived in the jazz milieu, often working with some of the old time jazz men down in Greenwich Village. That experience gave him the idea for little Nooley. In this story Phillips has picked up the customs and speech of the jazz world in a way that reminds us of the American folkway writing of John O'Hara and Ring Lardner. This is a hopeful sign at a time when we find so much flat and colorless prose.

LETTER from the crazy house

The following letter, from a state mental hospital, came to us over the transom. We thought it was too interesting a commentary on the American scene to cut down and tuck away in our readers' opinion department.

THE EDITORS

DEAR EDITOR:

As a young writer who has spent the last nineteen months in a straitjacket, I take encouragement from the NEW MERCURY.

I can especially appreciate the *Untold Facts in the Forrestal Case*.

My own opinions appear to parallel yours. And I'd like mighty well to join you in your campaign, and there is a number of little things I could do — if you will just get me out of this jailhouse.

Nineteen months straitjacketed is figuratively speaking; however, for twenty-two days, last January and February, I really wore one of the damn things; that simply as punishment for having walked in to New York and vainly tried to enlist legal aid.

I happen to be a veteran with four and a half years honorable service. Have never in my life

committed a crime or any act of violence. That's discounting a few dozen fist fights down the years, where little damage was done and no charges preferred and no voodooistic psychiatrist was around to diagnose everyone as crazy. I am thirty-eight (and read yesterday that that was young), average height and weight, and am enjoying excellent over-all health and physical condition, the maintenance of which being largely accountable to regular additions to the abominable diet here. I am locked up in this crazy house for no other reason than writing to a young woman, a twenty-two-year-old divorcee, inviting her to spend the evening with me; nor did I propose or suggest, and indeed I did not intend, anything conceivably abnormal.

The very candid truth is, I had mailed approximately twenty copies of that same letter, mostly to feminine literati. Only the one got a complaint to the P.O. Dept. Most anyone, I think, would have found the letter provoking to an extreme. But I don't believe it would have shocked anybody. It was quite