

Cover by *Frank Cozzarelli*

CONTENTS

FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

- KEY WITNESS *by Frank Kane* 64

NOVELETTE

- BIGGEST RISK *by C. B. Gilford* 43

SHORT STORIES

- COP KILLER *by Dan Sontup* 1
 THE MAN WITH TWO FACES *by Henry Slesar* 12
 GRUBER CORNERS BY NINE *by John R. Starr* 23
 SEVEN LOUSY BUCKS *by C. L. Sweeney, Jr.* 29
 “. . . PUDDIN’ AND PIE . . .” *by De Forbes* 36
 THE WIRE LOOP *by Steve Harbor* 57
 RAT HATER *by Harlan Ellison* 108
 THANKS FOR THE DRINK, MAC *by Philip Weck* 119
 GOOD-BY, WORLD *by Jack Ritchie* 128
 THE EARRINGS *by Kermit Shelby* 133
 THE PLAYBOY *by Claudus Raye* 138

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*R. E. DECKER, *General Manager*WALTER R. SCHMIDT, *Editorial Director*WILLIAM MANNERS, *Managing Editor*CHARLES W. ADAMS, *Art Director*N. F. KING, *Associate Editor*GERALD ADAMS, *Assistant Art Director*JOE SHORE, *Advertising Rep.*

MANHUNT VOLUME 4, NUMBER 8, August, 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., 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 1956 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 U. S. A.

Gruber Corners

by Nine

EVERY TIME my aching feet hit the hostile pavement of U.S. 64, I said a few curse words for Bertram Moody. Every time I lifted a thumb at onrushing headlights, I worked his ancestors over. Occasionally I used a damn or so for myself, because I deserved what I was going through.

Moody had warned me often enough about getting drunk and missing the convoy. A dozen times he'd warned me, but he had always telegraphed the money I needed for

BY JOHN R. STARR

The host was a very congenial guy, until they got into his cellar . . .



a train or bus to catch Moody's All-American Shows in the next town.

That morning, however, after I'd hauled myself out of a strange bed, blown a hung-over kiss at the strange woman still asleep there and dispatched the usual telegram to Gruber Corners, Tenn., the carnival's next stopover, I got a different kind of wire. "If you make it here in time for tonight's show, okay," the wire read. "If not, you're fired. Cordially, Bert."

I was surprised at first that Bert had reached the end of his rope. After I took a gander at the road map, I found out why he had picked Paris, Tenn., to abandon me in. Gruber Corners was a hundred miles south, one of the carney's longer jumps, and there was no main highway between it and Paris. It was joggle and backtrack, with segments of the route passing over no less than three U.S. highways.

I figure Bert would have fired me outright, only guys with my talent are hard to come by. I'd have quit when I got that wire, only carney owners who'll put up with habits like mine are harder to come by. He was giving me a chance. A hard chance, but he must have known I'd take it.

I blew the lone dime I had left from last night's round of Paris bistros on a cup of coffee. It was twelve-fifteen by the courthouse clock when I started the first leg of my penitent journey by parking

myself under a sign which said, "JACKSON, 38 miles." Fourteen rides and five hours later, it was getting dark and I was legging it out of Selmer, on the home stretch.

A sign, some miles back, had announced that it was twenty-five miles to Gruber Corners. It was about twenty now, and I knew I'd never make it by nine o'clock if I had to walk it. And it was beginning to look like a ride was out of the question. No more than a dozen cars had passed me in an hour and they had all speeded up when they saw my thumb.

The feet kept hollering for a break, so I pulled off the concrete and stretched out on a grassy knoll. I got about two minutes rest before the whine of an approaching car sent me scurrying back to the road.

It was a heavy car, coming fast, with extremely bright headlights. I just made it, with time to straighten up and stick out my hand, when the car topped a rise and its lights splashed over me. The driver cut his engine immediately and screeched to a stop fifty yards past. I put the last of my strength into a gallop, overhauled the car and slid onto the foam-rubber seats of a 1956 Cadillac.

"Hi," I said to the big man driving. "Thanks. I was beginning to think nobody'd stop."

"We had a hitchhiker rob a guy on this road about a year ago," he said. "Makes you reluctant to pick anybody up."

"I can see that."

I eased back in the seat. He put his foot on the accelerator and put the lie to guys who say automatic transmissions rob a car of pickup. I saw that he was a heavy, rough-featured man who looked like he had once been an athlete and had never lost the condition of one.

"Going far?" I asked.

"How far you need to go?"

"A place called Gruber Corners."

"You in a big hurry?"

"Not particularly. Got to be there by nine. I'm with the carnival."

His eyebrow shot up. "Oh, this is something new. Carnival people hitchhiking to the job."

I told him about my habit of getting drunk and missing the convoy. He chuckled.

"They're not expecting you, then?"

"Well, I imagine Moody's got some pretty good bets on whether I make it or not."

"I'm going on into Gruber Corners, but I've got to stop by my place first. I'll be there well before nine. If you'd care to stop off with me, I'll be glad to take you on in."

"Say, that'll be fine," I said.

I leaned back against the cushion and closed my eyes. I needed a little rest if I was going to be sharp tonight. Just a little would do me. It was a good thing for the act that I could get by on a little, because that's as much as I usually got.

We went about ten miles and

turned off on a secondary road. Two miles down that he cut off on gravel and shortly he turned into a concrete drive that led to a house bigger than I'd imagined existed in this part of the country. It was strictly New York suburban, two stories and stretching over half an acre. There was a high, wire-mesh fence extending out of eye range on both sides of the ornate gate that stopped fifty yards from the mansion. The big fellow took a flashlight from the glove compartment, aimed it at an electric eye in the stone column on the left and the gate glided open. It closed itself as soon as we had passed through.

A semicircular drive led to an imposing front entrance. My host escorted me into a parlor that could have housed the Olympic Games and waved me to a seat. He pulled on an old-fashioned bell rope that called forth a scared-looking old Negro who scampered to a portable bar and whipped up a couple of highballs.

Over the drinks we got around to the amenities. His name was Jason Hecht. That meant no more to me than Bill Evans meant to him. He took a seat opposite me in the cluster of chairs around the cold fireplace. He was looking me over closer than I like to be studied, but I didn't complain. It was his house and his liquor.

The whiskey burned down into my stomach, reminding me I hadn't eaten that day. I accepted

readily when he offered food. The steaks the Negro brought were medium rare and thick enough to use for catchers' mitts. I did my best to keep from looking like a glutton, but it wasn't easy. Hecht toyed with his steak like that kind of eating was habit with him.

I was finishing off my steak when he suddenly asked, "How much do you weigh, Evans?"

"200, 210, maybe," I replied around a chunk of steak. "Why?"

"That makes you about my size."

"Yeah, I'd say we were about the same size."

There were fresh drinks waiting when we finished eating. They didn't last long.

Time hurried on. I began fretting when the huge clock over the fireplace chimed 7:30, because Hecht seemed in no hurry to leave. He got wound up talking about his college football days and some professional boxing he'd done afterward. I was beginning to get bored and nervous, too. I was too damn close to the carnival to be philosophical about missing the act now.

"Did you?" Hecht asked.

I hadn't heard the question. "Did I what?" I asked.

"Did you follow the fights, say 10 years ago?"

"No, not much. I don't remember your name."

"Oh, I didn't fight under my own name. I kept my background hidden very carefully. It would

have cost me the money I used to build this place, if my parents had ever found out I was a pugilist, as dad called them."

"What name did you use?" I asked because he expected me to.

"Shane," he said. "Ted Shane."

"Not Killer Shane!"

"Yes, that's what they called me."

I took a closer look at him. I'd seen pictures of Killer Shane, read a lot of articles about him in the sports magazines. Ever so often an editor would liven up a dead issue by rehashing the story of the boxer who had everything it took to be heavyweight champion except knowing when to stop. When he had a man helpless, the killer instinct seized him and it took referees, seconds and judges to pull him off. The first time he'd killed a man like that, he was suspended for six months. The second time he was barred from the ring for life. He disappeared after that. Ever so often, some punch drunk pug would claim he was Killer Shane, but a little checking revealed the lie. So this was what had happened to Killer Shane.

"Sure! I know you then. I know a dozen editors who'd give their eye teeth for a story about what happened to you."

"But you wouldn't tell them, would you, Evans?"

"Hell no. I figure a man's got a right to live as he pleases."

His eyes burned into mine. The hard brightness of them scared me.

I stood up. "Mr. Hecht," I said, "I've got to be getting on if I'm going to make the carney by nine."

"We've got plenty of time, Evans," he said.

The way he said that brought it all back—the emphasis he'd put on nobody expecting me, how he'd dismissed the Negro after the second round of drinks, how he'd done nothing since we'd been in the house to account for his pressing need to visit it before we went on into Gruber Corners.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll leg it if you're not ready to leave. I can't afford to be late."

"It isn't all the same to me," he said sharply, "and you can't afford to try to leave, either." He drew a .38 revolver from his coat pocket and leveled it at my breastbone.

"Sit down," he ordered.

I sat.

"What the hell is this?" I demanded.

"Just a little game I play, Evans," he said. "A very serious little game."

"What's that?"

"Ever fought for your life, Evans?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean when it's kill or be killed."

"No, not like that. I've had some pretty rousing fights, but never that serious."

"What would you do if you were forced to fight for your life?"

The stuff I'd eaten churned like

my stomach was a washing machine.

"I'd rather not."

His eyes blazed. "Christ, man, there's no other way to fight. Any other way is like playing tiddly-winks. Boxing is for babies. When a real man got into the game, they made rules against him. I could have been the champion. I could have killed anyone in the game with either hand, but they called me a killer and banned me from the ring. I had to find someplace else to fight."

I didn't like what I was beginning to understand, but the gun in his hand was stronger than any argument I could muster. He got up and motioned with the gun for me to do likewise. He pointed the way and I led him through a long hall, down a flight of steps and through a thick, steel door. We stood on a concrete ramp, looking down into a room about the size of a handball court. It had sheer walls and I saw no stairway leading down into it.

Hecht touched a button and a stairway slid out of the wall and descended to the floor. "Go down," he ordered. "Strip and put your clothes on the bottom step."

I started to protest but he waved the gun menacingly. His eyes were shining bright stars. I don't argue with crazy men when they're waving guns. I went down the stairs and did as he instructed.

When I was standing naked in

the far corner of the arena, he elevated the stairway, removed my clothes and tossed them aside. Then he laid down the pistol and stripped himself. From a case beside the door, he took two matched hunting knives. He lowered the stairway and came down it, walking lightly.

I said he was heavy, but there was no fat on him. His smooth, powerful muscles rippled as he walked down the steps, holding himself very erect, enjoying my amazed stare.

"Are you any good with a knife, Evans?" he asked.

I saw them then, hundreds of scars that covered his body. There were minor cuts, healed into thin white lines, and the scars of more serious wounds that still showed red in his tanned skin.

"I've used one now and then," I said trying to keep my voice calm.

He bent and slid one of the knives across the floor to me. I picked it up and weighed it.

"There are no rules to this game," he said. "You may use your weapon any way you see fit. If you kill me, there are the stairs. The keys are in the Cadillac. The Negro is almost blind. He could never give a description of you. You have nothing to fear—if you

kill me."

"And if you kill me?"

"Why, I have nothing to fear either. No one knows you're here. It's doubtful if anyone at the carnival expects you. That makes us somewhat even."

"Even," I sneered. "Except that you've gone through this before and I..."

"Thirty-two times, to be exact. You are the thirty-third. Some have come close. You can see the scars."

He took a step toward me. I crouched and held the knife at ready. I hoped it was balanced. A chuckle started deep in his throat, growing in volume and intensity as he crouched and advanced on me, that wild light shining in his eyes.

He was fifteen feet away when I let the knife go. It drove into his chest exactly where I aimed, driving upward just under the short ribs. He fell and lay still . . .

I rode the Cadillac hard, thanking the darkening sky that Hecht hadn't been an archer or a whip man. Hadn't he realized the law of averages would get him sooner or later, the dumb bastard? It could have been later, of course, if he'd just asked what I did in Moody's All-American Shows.

