

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

- WRONG PIGEON *by Raymond Chandler* 1
 DEATH AT FULL MOON *by Al James* 80

SHORT STORIES

- A KILLER'S WITNESS *by Dick Ellis* 28
 MISER'S SECRET *by Richard Hardwick* 38
 THE TWELVE-GRAND SMOKE *by Frank Sisk* 46
 THE WORM TURNS *by R. D'Ascoli* 58
 THE GRATEFUL CORPSE *by Bob Bristow* 66
 THE LOST KEY *by Hal Ellison* 75
 SWITCH-BLADE *by Paul Daniels* 103
 THE IDIOT'S TALE *by Leo Ellis* 109
 AN EMPTY THREAT *by Donald E. Westlake* 118
 NO PLACE TO RUN *by Carroll Mayers* 124

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I WALKED into the cafeteria pretending nothing was wrong. I bought a cup of coffee and sat down at a table. I spread the Morning Telegraph face up on the table like Phil had told me. The stuff was in my pocket—a pair of little white boxes—it's funny how big they seemed.

My mouth was dry as sandpaper. My stomach sat in my insides like a tight ball of lead. My neck was

crawling as if a thousand maggots were eating at me. I was scared, scared the way you are when you're in a corner, trapped.

Marianne lay in the apartment, dead, and I had killed her.

I hadn't even sipped the coffee when sure enough this guy comes up to the table and gives me the word. "You got a hot tip?"

I stare at him and wet my lips. "There's one I like in the third."



THE WORM TURNS

BY R. D'ASCOLI

If he keeps his eyes open, a farm-boy living in Greenwich Village can learn a lot from his cheating wife and her dope-pushing lover.

"I was looking for one in the fifth."

"Maybe I can help you."

He sits down and puts a five on the table. I dig in my pocket and take out a box. Quick he catches my wrist. Three other guys rush up and grab me from behind. I figure I'd better act surprised.

"What is this?"

They pulled me up and started shoving me toward the door. The customers in the cafeteria gathered around. People on the street stopped to watch. It was a warm Saturday afternoon and there was a crowd on Sixth Avenue. The Feds shoved me into the front seat of an unmarked car.

"Alan Baker," one of them said.

"How do you know my name?"

"He wants to know how we know his name," one of the others said.

"You going to cooperate with us, Alan?" the first one said. "If you're smart you'll cooperate."

"Sure, I said. "I'll cooperate." Why not?"

We start driving to my place where I tell them I've got more of the stuff. While we drive all I can see is Marianne laying like I left her on the kitchen floor. I think I'm going to throw up but it's too late to turn back now. I sit quiet and try to figure things out.

It was just that morning, Saturday morning, I went to see Phil Trovi. I went to borrow money from him. You ever try to borrow from your

wife's lover? But I didn't know it then, I didn't know he was Marianne's lover. I was just a kid from Iowa. There were a lot of things I didn't know.

I wanted to be an actor. I came to the big town from Des Moines to make a fortune, to be famous. I was a greenhorn all right, a corn boy like Marianne called me.

I came to New York with my army savings and met Marianne and made my big mistake: I married her. I didn't make five cents acting and after a while we were broke. Things went from bad to worse with her and me and with the money gone, I was in a tight corner.

She started with other men. She knew I was too scared to stop her. I was scared she'd leave me. That's how things stood Friday night, the night of Phil's party.

Almost everybody left the party early. About one o'clock I started looking for my wife. I couldn't find her. I went upstairs and looked in the bedrooms. When I didn't find Marianne, I left the party. There were two couples on the couch but I didn't ask if they had seen her. They were glass-eyed. They held cigarettes loose in their hands. They would suck in some smoke and hold it. From their faces you could see they were getting a big thrill.

I walked south through Washington Square Park. I suppose I didn't really expect to find Marianne at home. Still, it wouldn't hurt

to try. She might have been tired. Or bored. Or maybe she had a headache. I was always making these excuses for her. Sometimes it's a hard thing to look the truth in the face.

I found out later where she had been. With Phil. She was with Phil in his car, parked over at a west side pier.

I can see them in the back seat of Phil's Buick. She opened her eyes, funny with that look a woman's eyes get. She took the hanky from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face. Her neck hurt where he bit her. She looked up at him. Phil was handsome with curly black hair and a tanned face. Her eyes were soft with love.

"Oh, Phil, baby," she said, "it's so lovely. Don't let's go back. Let's go away somewhere, just the two of us."

Phil straightened up and wiped his neck with the handkerchief. "Where'd you like to go? Bermuda maybe?"

"I mean it, darling."

"Listen, you're a married woman. You got a husband."

"He makes me sick."

"So maybe you'd like to move in with me. You wouldn't be so bad to have around."

"Oh, could I, Phil? Could I?"

"Why not? You'd be all right to have around."

This is the way Phil told the story at the trial. Then he had started to do again what he had

done before. He did this while I sat waiting in the apartment for Marianne to come home. I sat in the one comfortable chair and waited and a bottle of whiskey sat on the floor beside me.

I got up once to squash a cockroach that crossed the wall above the stove. They were one of the things about the flat that Marianne hated. There were other things too. The toilet in the hall. The bedroom so small it couldn't fit a chest of drawers. The big black stove we had to burn wood in for heat. I liked the place before I married. But now I had a wife.

"What a mess," I said. "Gad, what a pit." I poured another drink. Then I sat with the bottle and waited. At last I hear her climbing the stairs. I'm drunk when she comes in but I can see the creases in her skirt.

"Oh, you're awake," she says, taking the clip off the braid that hangs down her back.

I put down my glass. "Was it nice?"

"It was all right."

"I don't mean the party."

"Well, what do you mean? Just what?"

"You know what I mean."

"How should I? Why do you have to drink? You know you shouldn't drink. You can't hold it."

I jump at her and grab her arm. "Bitch! Who was it?"

"You're crazy."

"Who?"

"Nobody."

I wanted to hit her. I had never yet hit her and she really deserved it. I held her arm and cursed at her because I couldn't hit her.

"Finished?" she said.

"No. No, I'm not finished."

"Well I'm going to sleep."

"Like hell you are."

"I'm tired and I'm going to sleep."

"Was it nice? Did you like it?"

"Get your hands off me!"

"What do you think I am? How much do you think I'll take?"

"Everything." She pulled loose. She went into the bedroom and unzipped her skirt.

"You're my wife," I said.

"Well you're my husband. Make some money like other husbands. My man. My big rich successful man." She pulled the sheet over her and curled to sleep.

"Marianne?" I sat on the bed. I saw a red mark on her neck where the bum had bitten her. I was drunk. I began crying. "Baby?" I sat there a couple of minutes, crying. Then I went to bed myself.

It was eight o'clock when I woke up. I remembered something was wrong. Then I remembered what and remembered at the same moment that Marianne had come home and lay beside me. It was a relief at that seeing her there.

I lay quiet till the clock pointed at nine. I watched her sleep, her breasts rising and falling. I felt the familiar ache. She had a baby's face.

Her wide brown eyes sometimes looked scared. But they could look hard too.

"Baby." I kissed her neck.

"Baby."

She heaved in the bed and pulled the sheet around her. "What's the time?"

"Almost ten." I lied.

"My god. She closed her eyes and settled into the pillow. I knew she didn't want me. I couldn't help myself.

"Baby."

"Alan, stop!"

"You can sleep all day."

"Leave me alone."

I lowered the sheet from her shoulders. "I want to."

"Well I don't." She pulled the sheet tight around her and rolled over.

"Marianne. Baby."

She snapped her head around and her eyes were hard. "Look, I'm not interested. Is that plain? Is that quite plain? I am not interested."

I said nothing for a minute. Then I said: "Maybe you'll feel better after you sleep."

I got her a bromide and tomato juice. Then I put on my khakis and sandals. I had made up my mind about one thing. I had to have money. I had never cared about money but now I had to have it.

The village was deserted so early Saturday morning. The coffee house was almost empty. Phil was sitting at his usual table. His chair was tipped against the wall. A

stump of cigar stuck in his teeth. There was a man sitting at the table with him. There was nobody else but the waiter in the coffee house at that hour.

Phil watched me come in. I remember a kind of funny look came over his face. It was a good-looking face all right. I hope they didn't spoil it too much when they fried him.

"Listen, Phil, you got a minute."

"What's the matter Al?"

"Nothing. I want to talk to you."

"All right, Major," Phil said to the man. "I'll see you."

"Sure. I was goin' anyways. Go uptown."

We watched him go out. I sat down. "I didn't see you when I left last night."

"That so. I must of stepped out. I went out a minute to get a breath of air."

"I wanted to say good-night."

"Well I stepped out."

"Listen, Phil, what I want to talk to you about."

Phil put the cigar in the ashtray and laid both hands on the table. "Yeah?"

"I been thinking about going in business."

Phil laughed and put the cigar back in his mouth.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Nothing. How do you mean, business?"

"A shop. You know, belts, shoes, handbags. It's a big thing down here."

"Is it?"

"Only I need some money, Phil. A thousand would do it."

Phil brought his chair down hard on the floor. He was picking with his finger nail at the cigar.

"A thousand," I said. "For that you get half the take. You won't have to raise a finger."

I watched Phil watching the floor. Maybe he would do it. There was just the chance. It was the solution. A little business. Money coming in. Another apartment. "You can trust me, Phil. You know that."

"Sure."

"I mean I wouldn't cheat you a dime."

"I trust you. You got an honest face. Maybe I can help you, Al. Maybe I can fix it so you make this grand."

"Make it?"

"I'm going to show I trust you. I can trust you, can't I, Al?"

"You know that." The bum. Asking if *he* could trust *me* and all the while sleeping with my wife.

"Because, if you open your mouth you make a lot of trouble for a lot of people. But mostly for yourself."

"I'm no big-mouth."

"Something you learn about dough, it don't come easy. You don't just stand on the street corner and catch it. Lots of people think you just stand on the corner and it rains dough down on you."

"Well I never thought that."

"I'm not saying you, am I?"

"Hell, I'm not a damn kid. You think I'm a kid, Phil?"

"Nobody ever made a buck without a gamble. You willing to gamble, Al? Or maybe you're afraid?"

Phil was looking down at his hands, folded on the table. I looked down. Phil uncupped his hands. A small white box lay on the table. I stared at the box. The deep creases of Phil's face made a smile.

"A dozen doses in every box. I get forty bucks the box. You get five bucks the dose. Maybe sometimes more."

"Jesus," The dope sat there on the table. Twenty dollars profit a box, I was thinking. Fifty boxes. A thousand dollars. "What would I have to do?"

"Sell it, man."

"How?"

"Yes or no."

"Look, Phil, that shop's a good investment. I could do it on five bills. Really."

Phil was looking for his check. He wasn't listening to me. He had palmed the little box. "Five bills," I said.

"Look, you're not doing me the favor."

"You'd have a steady income."

"I got a steady income."

I looked at the cream floating, congealed, at the top of what was left of Phil's coffee. The waiter was coming over with the check. Phil put a quarter on the table.

"All right," I said.

A few minutes later I ran up the

stairs to the flat. I had a bunch of yellow flowers in my hand. In my pockets I had five little white boxes and a twenty dollar advance. I gave Marianne the flowers and the money. She put the flowers on the table. "Don't tell me," she said, counting the money.

"Buy yourself a dress or something."

"Thanks."

"There's more where that came from."

"How much?"

"Oh, I don't know. Enough. Plenty."

Marianne went over to the mirror. She started braiding her hair. She was proud of her hair. It was dark brown and thick. It reached most of the way down her back. She saw me in the mirror coming up behind her.

"Baby." I put my hands on her shoulders and kissed her neck. She shuddered when I touched her and pulled away from me.

"It's going to be all right," I said.

"Is it?"

"I'm going to make money. We'll get out of this place. Get a nice apartment. Maybe take a trip. It'll be fine, baby."

Marianne was making a braid, laying one plait of hair over another. She finished and put a clip at the end. "It'll never be fine."

"Sure it will."

"No. It won't."

"Once we have some money it'll be fine."

She stared into the mirror and tidied her hair, fixing the loose strands with pins. "It's too late, Al. I'm leaving you."

I could tell from her voice she meant it. I sat down in one of the kitchen chairs.

"You hear me, I'm leaving you."

"But it's going to be all right. I'm going to make money. We'll get out of here."

"I am getting out of here. Now. You go back where you came from. Go raise corn. That's all you're good for. Corn boy!" She went into the bedroom and came out with a grip.

"You're going now?"

"At twelve thirty, Al. He's coming for me at twelve thirty."

"Who?"

"All right. You may as well know. I'm going to live with Phil." She saw me wince and she went on, enjoying hurting me. "That's who I was with last night. Phil. In his car. He made love to me. It was nice. I liked him. Every time you ever touched me I wanted to scream. But you won't touch me again, Al. Never again."

Sometime while she was talking I remember I felt all the blood rush to my head but I still couldn't say for sure exactly what happened. I must have hit her because she went over backwards. There was an ugly sound of her head hitting the iron heater and then the crack of it bouncing on the tile floor. By the way she lay I knew she was dead.

I sat down at the table for a couple of minutes, then I went to the sink and threw cold water on my face. All the time I was thinking, thinking more clearly than I ever did before. I kept saying to myself, Think clear, think clear, corn boy.

Phil had given me the dope so he would have something on me, so that I'd never turn him in no matter how mad or jealous I got. He would live with my wife and I could never make any trouble. He was smart all right. But maybe I could be smart too.

Marianne said he was coming at twelve thirty. It wasn't quite twelve yet. I had a good half an hour. I unpacked her bag and put three of the little white boxes in a drawer. That left me with two. I went into the kitchen and tore Marianne's dress down the front. I left the door to the apartment unlocked. By the time I called the police and got to the cafeteria it was 12:10. I told them how they could pick up a pusher. I didn't tell them the pusher was myself.

As the Feds drove around to Sullivan Street, I must have looked at the dashboard every five seconds. It was 12:35. I figured even if we were late I had a good chance to nail Phil. But I couldn't have wished it better. The apartment door was off the latch and Phil was very surprised."

"Baby!" I screamed. "Baby! What'd he do to you!" I knelt over her. One of the Feds pulled me up.

Another one put his hand on her wrist. "Sorry, Buddy She's dead."

I started to cry. I cried real hard. Then I rushed Phil. "You dirty bastard!" They pulled me off him and sat me at the table. The tears were streaming down my face. It's amazing how easy it is to cry when

you absolutely have to.

Like I say, Phil got the chair. I drew two to three for pushing but seeing it's my first offense and I cooperated with the Feds, the warden tells me I'll be out in a year. I'll go back to Iowa. Marianne was right. A corn boy is all I am.

