

As Roy Dillon stumbled out of the shop his face was a sickish green, and each breath he drew was an incredible agony. A hard blow in the guts can do that to a man, and Dillon had gotten a hard one. Not with a fist, which would have been bad enough, but from the butt-end of a heavy club.

Somehow, he got back to his car and managed to slide into the seat. But that was all he could manage. He moaned as the change in posture cramped his stomach muscles; then, with a strangled gasp, he leaned out the window.

Several cars passed as he spewed vomit into the street, their occupants grinning, frowning sympathetically, or averting their eyes in disgust. But Roy Dillon was too sick to notice or to care if he had. When at last his stomach was empty, he felt better, though still not well enough to drive. By then, however, a prowl car had pulled up behind him—a sheriff's car, since he was in the county rather than city of Los Angeles—and a brown-clad deputy was inviting him to step out to the walk.

Dillon shakily obeyed.

“One too many, mister?”

“What?”

“Never mind.” The cop had already noticed the absence of liquor breath. “Let's see your driver's license.”

Dillon showed it to him, also displaying, with seeming inadvertence, an assortment of credit cards. Suspicion washed off the cop's face, giving way to concern.

“You seem pretty sick, Mr. Dillon. Any idea what caused it?”

“My lunch, I guess. I know I should know better, but I had a chicken-salad sandwich—and it didn't taste quite right when I was eating it—but . . .” He let his voice trail away, smiling a shy, rueful smile.

“Mmm-hmm!” The cop nodded grimly. “That stuff will do it to you. Well”—a shrewd up-and-down look—“you all right now? Want us to take you to a doctor?”

“Oh, no. I'm fine.”

“We got a first-aid man over to the substation. No trouble to run you over there.”

Roy declined, pleasantly but firmly. Any prolonged contact with

the cops would result in a record, and any kind of record was at best a nuisance. So far he had none; the scrapes which the grift had led him into had not led him to the cops. And he meant to keep it that way.

The deputy went back to the prowler car, and he and his partner drove off. Roy waved a smiling farewell to them and got back into his own car. Gingerly, wincing a little, he got a cigarette lit. Then, convinced that the last of the vomiting was over, he forced himself to lean back against the cushions.

He was in a suburb of Los Angeles, one of the many which resist incorporation despite their interdependence and the lack of visible boundaries. From here it was almost a thirty-mile drive back into the city, a very long thirty miles at this hour of the day. He needed to be in better shape than he was, to rest a while, before bucking the outbound tide of evening traffic. More important, he needed to reconstruct the details of his recent disaster, while they still remained fresh in his mind.

He closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them again focussing them on the changing light from a nearby traffic stand. And suddenly, without moving from the car—without physically moving from it—he was back inside the shop again. Sipping a limeade at the fountain, while he casually studied his surroundings.

It was little different from a thousand small shops in Los Angeles, establishments with an abbreviated soda fountain, a showcase or two of cigars, cigarettes, and candy, and overflowing racks of magazines, paperback books, and greeting cards. In the East, such shops were referred to as stationers' or candy stores. Here they were usually called confectionaries or simply fountains.

Dillon was the only customer in the place. The one other person present was the clerk, a large, lumpy-looking youth of perhaps nineteen or twenty. As Dillon finished his drink he noted the boy's manner as he tapped ice down around the freezer containers, working with a paradoxical mixture of diligence and indifference. He knew exactly what needed to be done, his expression said, and to hell with doing a bit more than that. Nothing for show, nothing to impress anyone. The boss's son, Dillon decided, putting down his glass and sliding off the stool. He sauntered up toward the cash register and the youth laid down the sawed-off ball bat with which he had been tamping. Then, wiping his hands on his apron, he also moved up to the register.

—"Ten cents," he said.

"And a package of those mints, too."

"Twenty cents."

"Twenty cents, hmm?" Roy began to fumble through his pockets, while the clerk fidgeted impatiently. "Now, I know I've got some change here. Bound to have. I wonder where the devil . . ."

Exasperatedly, he shook his head and drew out his wallet. "I'm sorry. Mind cashing a twenty?"

The clerk almost snatched the bill from his hand. He slapped the bill down on the cash register ledge and counted out the change from the drawer. Dillon absently picked it up, continuing his fumbling search of his pockets.

"Now, doesn't that get you? I mean, you know darned well you've got something, but—" He broke off, eyes widening with a pleased smile. "There it is—two dimes! Just give me back my twenty, will you?"

The clerk grabbed the dimes from him, and tossed back the bill. Dillon turned casually toward the door, pausing, on the way out, for a disinterested glance at the magazine display.

Thus, for the tenth time that day, he had worked the *twenties*, one of the three standard gimmicks of the short con grift. The other two are the *smack* and the *tat*, usually good for bigger scores but not nearly so swift nor safe. Some marks fall for the twenties repeatedly, without ever tipping.

Dillon didn't see the clerk come around the counter. The guy was just there, all of a sudden, a pouty snarl on his face, swinging the sawed-off bat like a battering ram.

"Dirty crook," he whinnied angrily. "Dirty crooks keep cheatin' me and cheatin' me, an' Papa cusses me out for it!"

The butt of the bat landed in Dillon's stomach. Even the clerk was startled by its effect. "Now, you can't blame me, mister," he stammered. "YOU were askin' for it. I give you change for twenty dollars, an' then you have me give the twenty back, an'—'an'—"—his self-righteousness began to crumble. "N-now, you know you did, m-mister."

Roy could think of nothing but his agony. He turned swimming eyes on the clerk, eyes flooded with pain-filled puzzlement. The look completely demolished the youth.

"It w-was j-just a mistake, mister. Y-you made a m-mistake, an' I m-made a m-m-mistake an'—mister!" He backed away terrified. "D-don't look at me like that!"

"You killed me," Dillon gasped. "You killed me, you rotten bastard!"

"Nah! P-please don't say t-that, mister!"

"I'm dying," Dillon gasped. And, then, somehow, he had gotten out of the place.

And now, seated in his car and re-examining the incident, he could see no reason to fault himself, no flaw in his technique. It was just bad luck. He'd simply caught a goof, and goofs couldn't be figured.

He was right about that. And he'd been right about something else, although he didn't know it.

As he drove back to Los Angeles, constantly braking and speeding **up** in the thickening traffic, repeatedly stopping and starting with every passing minute, he was dying.

Death might be forestalled if he took proper care of himself. Otherwise, he had no more than three days to live.