

Winter 1937

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Recommended Citation

Daniel J. Gillin, Noiseless Rackets I Have Heard, 28 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 551 (1937-1938)

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NOISELESS RACKETS I HAVE HEARD

DANIEL J. GILLIN¹

"These men were engaged in a racket—and a contemptible racket," I loudly exclaimed, pointing to the prisoner's cage which contained two defendants on trial for larceny. Hardly had these words left my lips when the attorney for the defense was on his feet, objecting with all the force in him to this remark and requesting the judge to order the jury to disregard the word "racket."

A hurly-burly of words followed which was only ended when His Honor broke in upon us and solemnly addressing the jury said, "Gentlemen! a racket as I understand it is a loud noise and the only racket in this case so far has been made by the two lawyers."

Needless to say, a gale of laughter swept through the crowded court room, which was quickly silenced by the ominous command of the deputy sheriff, "Order! order! order in the court!" And needless to say, two struggling and ambitious barristers were also silenced by this legal wisecrack.

It was some years back when this incident took place when as a prosecuting attorney I was making the final argument in a criminal case. The word racket was then in its infancy insofar as it related to the underworld and things criminal; but how it has grown! From a simple, guileless word associated only with tennis, noise and commotion, it has grown by leaps and bounds until today it is on the front page of the dictionary Americana—as well as on the front page of every daily in the country.

As a prosecuting attorney in a large American city, the opportunity has been mine to see and hear of racket upon racket by reason of having presented about 15,000 felony cases to Grand Juries and having tried hundreds upon hundreds of criminal cases before petit juries. And, as the years have unfolded since the incident I described took place, the curt remark of the judge has flashed across my mind many times—"a racket is a loud noise"—and as often have I thought—while that is true, on the other hand, there are many rackets which are noiseless—and what a heavy toll they take from the American people yearly.

It is of these noiseless rackets I intend to write—and of their

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perpetrators. Not the type of crime where a pistol, bomb or sawed-off shot gun is used, but the "smart money" crimes—that in the main require nothing more than an agile brain, a fountain pen and a blank check to produce results. The effective, noiseless rackets of the underworld—the schemes of the "con" man and the pen man—the criminal gentry who sympathetically and patronizingly look down upon the ordinary burglar and robber as uncouth and lacking in finesse because their jobs are accomplished with noise, force and oftentimes brutality.

These noiseless rackets bring results—and quickly. Money in the form of cash—no danger to life and limb is attached to these criminal enterprises. The perpetrator is doing his stuff and getting the money at once and he has no fear as the burglar or robber of a sudden bullet from his victim or from a police officer, who may chance upon the scene of the crime.

But every crook cannot work a noiseless racket. It takes time, study, a lot of planning and a knowledge of human types to work these "con" games properly and successfully. For the "con" man is selective in his pick of victims and invariably can single out one a little dumb or slow witted who does not get the obviousness of the trick by which he is being victimized until long after he has been relieved of his savings of a lifetime.

I venture to comment that many readers will say, how can anyone be so stupid as to be fooled by the rackets I will relate—they are so patently fraudulent and simple.

But the best answer to this question is the fact that every one of them has been worked successfully and money obtained as a result in a great American municipality; and while the victims have not been mental giants, neither have they been morons.

In any event the law is for the protection of the dull-witted and unthinking as well as those citizens possessing a keen intellect and as there are laws on our statute books penalizing noiseless rackets it is indicative of the fact that legislatures generally, recognize the necessity of protecting the gullible from preying thieves.

Can the "con" man or woman tell by appearances before they make their approach the mental growth of the victim? I do not know. It may be that they fail to interest many prospects in their games and that a prosecuting attorney sees only the victims they have successfully operated upon; but regardless of this, 70% of the victims I have seen are either mentally slow or of foreign birth.

Both these classes, however, may have money and that in the end is what this criminal gentry is after.

How many rackets are there? It was a professor in an American college who stated that since the beginning of time there were only 27 or 28 jokes and all jokes were based upon these and were simply variations of the original 27 or 28. I think there are a lesser number of "con" games; but they can be dressed up so differently when occasion requires and glossed over in such a deceptive manner that they oftentimes look new, but stripped of their veneer they are the same fundamental and original few "con" games.

John Doe and Jane Doe are man and wife and with their friend Richard Roe are going from city to city working their noiseless rackets.

They arrive in a large city, register at a hotel and spend a week or two looking the place over and getting a lay of the land before they start to operate. Now they are ready! Let's follow them and watch them do their stuff.

RACKETS

Number 1.

John Doe visits the office of a business man who is to be the victim and informs him that as an agent for a wealthy bootlegger in an adjoining state, he has \$50,000 in cash to loan at 2 per cent interest. No security will be necessary other than the promissory note of the victim because they recognize the standing of the victim in the community and feel the note is security enough.

Doe insists the bootlegger has all cash money because he wishes to avoid income taxes and consequently cannot bank it.

The victim is attracted by the low rate of interest and the plausibility of the story, and agrees to do business. The next day Doe as part of the work up, informs the victim that the bootlegger wants to be sure that nothing happens to the \$50,000 while in transit.

John Doe to help the victim over this hurdle offers to hire two gun men to protect the money and will charter a plane and fly down with them and the money for an \$800 fee. The victim considers this cheap and on the following day Doe again appears with two men who show the victim two revolvers as evidence of the fact they are gunmen. The victim pays over the \$800 to Doe and said victim

never gets the \$50,000 and does not see John Doe again until he is arrested for larceny of \$800. (This is simply a rough outline of the racket. A great deal more detail was used in working it.)

Number 2.

Jane Doe visits the vestibules of several exclusive apartment houses around the first of the month and steals certain letters from the mail boxes.

Among these, she gets the monthly charge account bill of wealthy Mrs. Jones, which was sent from the Empire Department store. The bill is in the amount of \$50 which is for Mrs. Jones' purchases during the past month.

Jane Doe takes the bill to the cashier of the department store and pays it with a fake check in the amount of \$200, representing she is Mrs. Jones' maid. Jane gets \$150 change and the paid bill.

With the paid bill as identification she makes purchases for her own use while in the store, representing she is Mrs. Jones and orders the goods charged to Mrs. Jones' account.

When Jane Doe leaves the store she has the articles she purchased—free—and \$150—a good day's work.

Number 3.

Jane Doe goes to the Eagle National Bank in Boston and opens an account in the Commercial Department giving a fake address.

She deposits \$50 in cash and on the two following days the same amount, making sure on each occasion she does business with the same clerk.

On the fourth day she deposits a fake check drawn on a Chicago bank in the amount of \$300. The amount of her account is now \$450.

That same afternoon she draws a check payable to cash and presents it to the same teller for payment. It is in the amount of \$400. As this leaves a \$50 balance the suspicions of the clerk are not aroused. He pays; and three days later he learns from the Chicago bank the check is a fake. Her profit on this deal is \$250. (Many banks will not pay in a situation of this kind but this one did.)

Number 4.

Richard Roe reading the newspapers discovers that John Huntington, a leading lawyer of the city, is on vacation in Berlin. Roe

then finds out the name of Huntington's secretary. He makes a fake cablegram and deposits it in the mail box of the law office addressed to the secretary. The cablegram is signed Huntington and orders the secretary to pay for a trunk that will be delivered to her; one that he has shipped from Europe.

An hour after the secretary gets the cablegram Roe calls on the telephone to say he has the trunk and it will cost \$800. She meets Roe at the station and gets the trunk. Roe informs her it contains valuable antiques and that the trunk is not to be opened until Huntington returns from Europe. She is given to understand the price was \$800 because the valuable antiques have been sneaked in by the Customs officials without payment of duty. She gives Roe the \$800.

The trunk is carefully placed in the law office safe and when Huntington returns from Europe and says he did not send a trunk, they open it and find it is filled with old telephone books.

Number 5.

John Doe cuts several "tenement to let" advertisements out of the morning paper.

He visits the home of one of these advertisers and is informed by the victim she will rent the suite to him for \$50 per month.

He looks the suite over and is satisfied. He hires it. He takes out a check book and writes a fake check for \$50—the rent for the first month.

He will move in next week. As he is about to depart he discovers he has lost his money and he wants to know if she will lend him ten or twenty dollars and he will pay her back tomorrow.

Having his fifty dollar check as she thinks—the victim feels the loan would of course be paid back. She gives him the ten dollars and never sees him again until he is arrested.

This sounds petty; but if John Doe works five of these in a day it is a good day's pay; and it has been done.

Number 6.

Jane Doe has kept her eye on the people entering a high grade jewelry store. She follows a woman of wealthy appearance into the store and up to the counter. Jane stands a few feet away, apparently looking at the rings in a case, but near enough to hear the wealthy woman's conversation with the clerk.

She learns it is Mrs. James Smith and she observes the latter is purchasing a wrist watch and has looked at several before she buys one.

When Mrs. Smith leaves the store Jane walks out after her near enough to convey the impression to observers that she is with Mrs. Smith.

An hour later Jane Doe enters the store alone. Going to the clerk Mrs. Smith has dealt with she informs him she is the maid of Mrs. Smith and has been sent by Mrs. Smith to fetch one of the watches to her house because she is not satisfied with the one she bought. She would like to have Mr. Smith make the selection from the two watches tonight.

Jane Doe indicates Mrs. Smith has described the watch she wants and if the clerk will show her the watches Mrs. Smith was looking at she can pick it out. He does.

Jane picks out a \$250 watch. The clerk having observed Jane Doe with Mrs. Smith feels the story is true. Mrs. Smith is a good customer with a charge account. He gives Jane Doe the watch and a week later when Mrs. James Smith has done nothing in regard to the watches he learns for the first time he has been duped.

Number 7.

John Doe and Richard Roe learn that two small store keepers Smith and Jones are very friendly. Their stores are a hundred feet apart.

Doe posts himself near the store of Smith on the opposite side of the street. Richard Roe gets on a telephone in a pay station of a nearby store and calls Smith on the telephone and asks him to come down to the store of Jones at once as Jones has been taken very ill. Smith runs right out to the store of his friend Jones and no sooner does he get out the door than John Doe slips across the street into the store of Smith, opens the cash drawer and takes all there is—more than a hundred dollars, and makes a quick getaway. Of course they made sure no one was in Smith's store but the owner before they pulled this one.

Number 8.

Roe and Doe meet a victim on the street and engage him in conversation. Roe then produces what purports to be a ten dollar bill split in halves. (All paper currency when soaked in a liquid can be split with the aid of a razor blade.)

The victim is so interested they invite him to the hotel and show him a mechanical device they possess for use in making a new bill out of one of the halves. They split a ten dollar bill for him, peeling it in two pieces. Then they give him a demonstration by inserting one of the halves in the end of the machine. They move certain handles in the box. Then a new ten dollar bill is ejected from the other end of the box; all pre-arranged of course.

They then assure him how wealthy they all can be with this new invention. With every ten they get they can make two new bills. The victim is interested and draws \$500 from the bank and gets it all in ten dollar bills.

In order that they may not be discovered they go to an adjoining town and hire a room in a small hotel. Roe and Doe set up the magic box and the victim produces his fifty ten dollar bills. They then start to work, but Doe suddenly remembers that he has forgotten to bring a bottle of glue which is necessary for the successful operation of the enterprise and requests the victim to go to a nearby store and get a bottle of glue which he agrees to do.

When the victim returns with the glue Doe, Roe and the fifty ten dollar bills are missing.

Number 9.

Richard Roe approaches a woman along in years who conducts a small store. He engages her in conversation at the front door of her store. He hands her a note and asks her to read it. As she is attempting to decipher the message Jane Doe and John Doe come along (pre-arranged of course). They inject themselves into the conversation. The victim cannot make out what is in the note and John Doe offers to read it. As he takes the note, Richard Roe pulls a Russian coin from his pocket and exhibits it. John Doe is at once attracted by it and offers Roe a dollar for it and gets it. Doe ventures the opinion he has made a good bargain and can resell the coin for fifteen dollars.

Roe then pulls a diamond from his pocket and announces he has 24 just like it that he desires to sell.

The victim is now interested and she takes the diamond to a nearby jewelry store and it is appraised for \$250. She is now deeply interested in the deal and although Roe demands \$5000 for the 24 diamonds she succeeds in beating him down to \$2000.

Jane Doe is now interested and offers to go partners with the

victim as soon as she can get \$1000 from her bank in a town adjoining the city.

The victim then accompanies the trio to her bank in the financial section of the city. She draws out \$2000, turns it over to Roe and gets a penny match box with the 24 diamonds.

They then tell the victim to wait in the lobby of the bank until they go to the adjoining town where Jane Doe will draw out her \$1000 to go partners with the victim.

Three hours later the victim begins to worry when the trio have not returned and goes to a jeweler to find out that the 24 diamonds in the penny match box are 24 pieces of glass. The trio does not return. (The original diamond they exhibited was genuine; but it was not put in the match box.)

Number 10.

Jane Doe calls the office of the Empire Undertaking Company on the telephone and informs them she is the secretary of the Superintendent of the Municipal Hospital. She tells them that Mary Smith of New York has just died at the hospital and the superintendent has referred the son of the deceased to the Empire Company to make funeral arrangements. John Smith, the son, enters the Empire Company office an hour later and with tears in his eyes informs them of the death of his mother.

The clerk tells him the superintendent of the hospital has already phoned about the case and the Empire Company will take full charge, and arrange with a New York undertaker to handle matters when the body arrives there.

John Smith makes sure to tell the clerk that his mother has \$5000 life insurance and this knowledge, together with the recommendation by the hospital superintendent, makes the Empire Company officials feel John Smith is a good risk.

So when John Smith, who is really John Doe, the husband of Jane Doe, suddenly discovers he is short of money and asks for a loan of \$50 until he gets back to New York, they hand it right over to him and never see him again until he is arrested.

This racket was worked three times in a month on three different undertakers in the same city in various forms; sometimes with the aid of a fake telegram, but on all occasions with results.

I do not say that any three people working together have done all the jobs I have set forth. I have presented the schemes in this manner because I felt they would be easier to follow. But all the

rackets I have described have been worked with good results, and I suppose will be worked again and again, year after year.

Are these noiseless racketeers as great a public menace as the robber or the burglar? Some say, yes! Some say, no! But be that as it may, they take thousands upon thousands of dollars from the citizenry of the country yearly by their frauds.

I hope the recital of a few of these noiseless rackets may in the future save some reader a few dollars. When one approaches you with a proposition that looks a little too good—hesitate—and tell him to come back the next day.

If it is a fake the “con” man may lose his nerve—feeling you are wise—and fail to return. If he returns you have had the benefit of a day to think it over and your answer may be a loud, no!

But whether it is yes or no I think we will all agree that Barnum was right. We will always have suckers; and for every one we will have two crooks to take him—because so many honest people are looking for easy money.