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THE PICKPOCKET: PSYCHOLOGY, TACTICS AND TECHNIQUE

Hans von Hentig¹

Every pattern of human activity tends to rely more and more upon techniques. Criminal activity is no exception to the rule. If the criminal would survive as a self-supporting individual, he must develop the skills and the knacks of his trade. But purely mechanical dexterity can not be separated from the mental processes of designing an attack. It is the function of psychology to choose the right moment for using this or that mode of assault.

The attack by the criminal can be divided into preparation, execution and protective devices which shield the retreat when the crime has been committed. By protection we mean not only the avoidance of detection but also all the tricks which obscure the criminal act and so tend to reduce its legal significance.

How the Pickpocket Protects Himself

For centuries the conflict between the pickpocket and the victim has not changed. We are accustomed to surround money and other valuables with certain mechanical defenses. We withdraw them from sight. The display of women's jewels is an exception. They may be seen and coveted. The publicity given to jewels applies not only to their display, but also to their removal. Publicity is a protection as well as a danger.

Next to the mechanical protection afforded by pockets, watch-chains and other means we secure our property by the degree of attention we give it. When we carry money with us we avoid unsafe sections, dangerous times of the day or the approach of suspicious looking individuals. The carrier of valuables suspects the poorly clothed individual who is believed to be the prototype of those who are covetous of other people's plenty. In default of a better psychology the fearfulness of the owner of valuables borrows suspicion from the mere external covering, or from rough evidences of want, such as paleness; hollow cheeks or eyes; a hungry look; the appearance of being tired or cold.

The protecting scope of attention has its own rules. We are more attentive in the morning than when we are driving home after long and tiring hours of work. Children and women (professors too) are said to be less attentive than other people. With children and professors it is a special case: both are hyper-attentive, but their attention is generally drawn away from present tangible objects. This diverted attention seems to be more favorable for

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the activities of the pickpocket than a general lowering of attention levels. Diverted attention can, furthermore, be more easily recognized than inattention. The latter can be simulated, and thus may be a dangerous trap.

Procedure in the Act

In addition to the protective mechanism of clothes, chains and so forth, and the covering circle of our attention we like to have the protection that is afforded by distance from our fellow-creatures. Distance guards us from direct physical aggression and gives us opportunity of escape. It is an eminently important defense. All these obstacles have to be overcome by the pickpocket. From a preparatory act to an act of "cover," we have the following schematic analysis of a pickpocket's procedure:

- a—Evaluation of the victim by the pickpocket
- b—Overcoming the spatial distance between thief and victim
- c—Overcoming the mental protection exerted by the victim
- d—Overcoming the mechanical protection used by the victim
- e—Securing the booty by floating it along to an accomplice

According to this scheme the pickpocket must know or presume that a certain person has money or other valuables on him. This can be established by many indications: the use of certain trains or certain accommodations aboard ship. Purchase of expensive seats in theatres or movies. Entertainment of expensive guests in night clubs, on dude ranches and at sport resorts. Registration in expensive hotels. It can be established by carefully watching booking-offices in banks, travel bureaus and railroad stations. Finally there is that general impression of self-assurance, ponderosity, unconcern, and good humor—sometimes anxiety too—that is presented by people who have much money in their pockets. We do not give much thought to these things. But the experienced pickpocket, no doubt, has a distinct feeling of the reflex left by a full purse, on the mood and the gait of the individual. People with money walk differently from those without money; and there is a distinct difference in the way they move their arms, and inspect shop windows and restaurants. There are other evidences. Promptness of payment, e.g., in agricultural sections of the country when cattle or crops have been sold. The farmer released for short festival periods from work often displays an explosive inclination to waste money and to enjoy the wasting.

When the pickpocket has found one who, he believes, has valuables, a direct approach is bad tactics. It is not customary to address unknown people. Such procedure awakens distrust. The pickpocket goes at it in another way. He seeks for a crowd situation when people are close together in busses (busses are more suitable than streetcars because of the more violent and irregular movements to and fro), at the athletic contest, parade, theatre, museum or exhibition. Visitors to concerts are more absorbed than hearers

of lectures. The situation is especially favorable when the members of the crowd are at once tired, excited and diverted. Good hunting-grounds for pickpockets are the department stores, night-clubs and, in small towns, the market-place on a Saturday night. A favorite device is for associated pickpockets to mingle with the crowd, increase its numbers and density and to correct unfavorable groupings. The difficulty of passing on narrow platforms and in pullman corridors, the nervous rush to theatre check-rooms, or to see some celebrity, all these situations can be utilized during a short, close contact.

When local distance has been eliminated there is still that protective zone to be overcome which we all tend to create around ourselves. We pull away from suspicious figures and thus increase the protective circle. Therefore the successful pickpocket must be well dressed. "Don't be deceived by fine clothes and good appearance. Sneak thieves must look well to do business." This is rightly one of the twenty-four commands of the American Jeweler's Security Alliance.

On the other hand a pickpocket must not be dressed too elegantly or too showily. By this professional mistake he would be easily remembered, recognized and caught. He ought to look distinguished in the eyes of a fashionable jeweler, but not in the eyes of the next patrolman. Good manners help, and whatever else shows a touch of that self-conceit which seems to derive from a long line of honest but not over-intelligent ancestors; the external fiction of wealth, good conscience and flattering naiveté. The good pickpocket uses all these never failing means to lull the victim into a feeling of security. After the crime has been committed suspicion is not likely to envisage such a true gentleman.

Besides a harmless exterior that disarms defense the pickpocket is fond of another trick. It is taken from the repertory of the magician. He either profits by the diverted attention of the victim, or he creates such a diversion. All exciting events are suitable for this purpose. Sometimes he produces diversion by hurting the victim—tramping on his foot, e.g., by showing an offensive attitude as by staring at his wife or daughter. By such means he directs attention the wrong way. Sensational flying performances, illuminations and fireworks present the additional advantage of focussing attention at a level above the heads of the mass. Consequently any movement among the people is unobserved.

At this point the application of pure technique begins. It can be set in operation only after all other conditions are ready. The pickpocket is now prepared to proceed to the immediate attack.

The Pickpocket's Hands and Movements

All muscular innervations must be quick. An indication of this ability is the triad: look, walk, speech. Still more, the tool used—the hand—needs careful training and must be of a suitable shape. It must be small; the fingers long, muscular and endowed with a most refined sense of touch. The pickpocket must be able to recognize with the utmost celerity, by means of an instantaneous contact, any possible object he may meet in a man's pocket or a woman's handbag.

"The rough skin on your hand must be changed," says the instructor to a student of pickpocketing, in that autobiography of criminals published ten years ago by Luz, one of my pupils. . . . You got to bathe your hand often and with soda, and then you got to rub it with glycerin or with a good cream."

The thief's grip, called the "claw" in the slang of European criminals has often been described. It was used already in the narrow streets of Old London and on the crowded bridges of mediaeval Florence. To be able to operate as "claw" the hands must be absolutely free. The pickpocket is hindered by a cane or an umbrella, by stiff cuffs, big rings or wrist-watches. The best groomed pickpocket can never afford to wear gloves. Sometimes he may carry a top coat over the working arm as a kind of camouflage.

Celerity is required and again celerity! If the work is skillfully done the victim does not notice the slightest contact; he does not notice any weight-difference when an object is withdrawn from his pocket. The slang of European pickpockets therefore calls the unsuspecting prospect the "corpse." Like a dead body he is without sense of what has happened to him, and the English term "light-fingered" is the linguistic equivalent of the actual procedure. When we add the final step: quickly passing along the stolen object to an accomplice, the tactics and technique of the pickpocket are complete.

Age, Sex, Race

Because tactics and technique have to be learned the great pickpockets are never very young. They are seldom women, although a woman can more easily approach a man than can another man. Of all the arrests for larceny from the person by stealth which were executed in New York City (1938-1941) about 10 per cent were females. That the attempt at picking pockets is either misinterpreted by the male sucker or condoned can be gathered from the fact that of all arrests for attempted pocket picking during the five years 1937-41 only 2.5 per cent referred to females.²

The greatest risk a pickpocket takes is incurred during the initial phases of his attack. As soon as he has seized the money or the object he has reached relatively safe ground. That is why of all

² Figures computed from Annual Reports of the Police Department of the City of New York, for the years 1938, 1939 and 1941, pp. 102, 138 and 144.

larcenies from the person by stealth, as far as New York City arrests are concerned, about 60 per cent were attempted pocket picking. We have no exact figures but I fear that the rate of dismissed cases and acquittals is pretty high as in all other attempted felonies.

Expert pickpockets are for the most part of southern and eastern descent, at least in Europe. The Negro rate is not high. The approach is rendered difficult by our racial separation although his fingers and his brain may be quick as far as we can judge by his splendid dancing performances.

Pickpockets are present at all great mass performances. A presidential campaign, a world exhibition, the return of a celebrated flyer attract them like a magnet. They have their own roads of migration like birds, their favorite hunting grounds, their hotels. They have their lawyers "in waiting" and their fixers, their contact men through whom insurance companies, captains of detectives and detective agencies can reach them for a round table negotiation. They have a moral code of their own; a real tradition which is passed on from great, admired and never apprehended masters to ambitious novices. Tactics and technique can be learned. All the great pickpockets I have happened to know considered it doubtful whether psychology has rules that may be taught. They all believed in the "call of the blood" and that the born pickpocket leaves the scene of a great hit with the same exaltation and satisfied "let down" that follows an amorous adventure.

Some of them have been arrested many times, yet the real master thief has not spent a day in prison. Everything, they tell you, depends on one hard and crucial resolution: to quit the racket when your fingers grow old and slow and to find shelter in that intermediate zone between crime and legitimate business, which is rather the fate than the goal of the hoary crook, and where even the unknown criminal expiates his sins—at least in his way, being just one of so many half-honest people.

Curiously

Plowden states this case: "If a woman is warden of the Fleet, and one imprisoned in the Fleet marries her, it is an escape in the woman and the law adjudges the prisoner to be at large, for he cannot be lawfully imprisoned but under a keeper, and he cannot be under the custody of his wife, for which reason the law must necessarily adjudge him to be at large."—(Heard's *Curiosities of the Law Reporters*—1881)