

How We Help Out the Men Who Rob Us

Some Foolish Things That We Do and Some Ways We Might Adopt

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JAMES C. MURNANE, Chief of the Bureau of Identification, St. Paul Police Department, and a veteran detective, who points out some ways in which we actually help men rob us. He is one of the best-known Bertillon experts in the country.

HUGE sums in money and jewels are stolen every year. Every newspaper carries reports of robberies of some kind. But few people realize that many of these losses might have been avoided.

Yet that is true. Men are always doing foolish things with their money or valuables, and so are the women. Sometimes they are just careless. More often they don't stop to think how easy they are making it for the burglar, or the pickpocket. Often they actually invite men to rob them. Of course, they don't intend to do it, but they do.

Now, take the pickpocket. Every year he reaps a rich harvest, much because persons don't keep their wits about them.

Incidentally, right now is the great open season for the pickpocket. Perhaps you never thought of it, but picking pockets is a summer occupation. It's too hard to find a man's pocketbook when he's bundled up in an overcoat, while in his summer clothes, it's easy. Pickpockets go South in winter, and come back with the warm days. They always get back by the Fourth of July—you see, that's one of their big harvest days.

So it may not be amiss to consider the methods of the pickpocket, and some practical means of foiling him. If men took only reasonable precautions, if they were only as observant as the professional criminal for instance, a lot of good pickpockets and burglars would be hunting other jobs.

Now, a pickpocket is an artist in his way. I have seen them so good that they could flip your money out of your pocket just in walking past you. A man digs down into an inside pocket to get money to buy a ticket. I have seen men who could brush past him and flip his roll out of his pocket while he's getting ready to button up his vest or his coat.

Here is a story that is characteristic, for instance. A bunch of pickpockets got on a train at Denver. There were nine men in the crowd.

"We won't buy any ducats, but we will try to short the caducer," one of the gang said. They call the conductor the "caducer."

So they boarded the train without any tickets and paid their fares in cash. After they were out of Denver a little way, one man in the gang, Eddie Harvey, picked the conductor's pocket, and got all the money back.

Contrary to the popular belief, pickpockets work in groups, or "mobs." Usually in a mob, there are two or three "stalls," and one "tool." It is the job of the "stall" to distract your attention. Maybe he just knocks back your hat a little, apparently by accident, as the street car lurches a little. That is enough, just a moment while your attention is distracted the trick is done. The "tool" is the man who actually takes the money from your pocket. Usually, he passes the money to another member of the gang, known as the carrier, who makes the get-away, as they call it.

Now, here is a peculiar thing. Almost never do the victims pick out the right man when they find out they have been robbed. Men do the funniest kind of things when they get their pockets picked anyway. Sometimes they will turn around and grab the first man they see. Nine times out of ten, it is the wrong man. Lots of men will yell until you can hear them for a block. That, by the way, is the worst thing that a man could do, for it creates confusion, which is just the thing the pickpockets want to get away. And here is something else worth noting. If a

fellow finds a good-looking woman thrown against him in a crowded street car as the car lurches, he's not going to resent it. It would be different if a man bumped against him. During the momentary distraction, a clever pickpocket can slip out his pocketbook unnoticed. There are lots of women pickpockets, and they are among the cleverest in the business.

Women rarely are caught picking pockets, either. You know how it is—you suddenly miss your pocketbook and look around and see a good-looking woman. Would you accuse her? Not on your life!

It is extremely hard to catch a "tool" in the act of picking a pocket, for it is done very quickly and usually there is a member of the gang standing on each side to obscure the view. Only the trained observer will notice a group of pickpockets working in a crowd. An amusing incident happened some years ago while a group of detectives were watching a crowd for pickpockets. Suddenly, one of the detectives came over to me very excitedly and said, "It's gone, my pocketbook—I've been robbed."

Men are always showing their money needlessly in public places, and they are always giving the prospective pickpocket assistance when they do it. If I were to lay down rules to avoid the pickpocket, one of them would be: "Never change a large bill at a ticket window, or other public place." Every man who shows a substantial sum of money invites robbery. A man may reach down into an inside pocket to get his money. The pickpocket notes the location of the wallet, and notices whether it seems well filled. Ninety per cent of the touch is accomplished right there.

There are six pockets in which a man carries money, and there is only one which may be called proof against pickpockets. Not very many men would think of it, but the only comparatively safe pocket is the little fob pocket down under the belt of the trousers. If you roll up your bills and stick them in this pocket, the only way a pickpocket can get them is to steal your trousers.

That pocket lies so close to the body that no pickpocket with his senses about him would try to pick it.

All the other pockets are easy for the expert pickpocket. If a man has a long, deep pocket, as for instance those at the side of the trousers the pickpocket "reefs" it, as he calls it. That is one of the most delicate operations in the business. The pickpocket slips two fingers into the pocket. He takes hold of the lining of the pocket on the side away from the body, and pulls the lining out gently, a little at a time, until he can reach the pocketbook.

Another rule to avoid pickpockets, I'd put into these words—"Never mingle with a crowd." Pickpockets always do their work in crowds, for then if a man is jostled, he will not notice it. Often, they create some source of excitement just to draw a crowd. I have known them to hire a tramp to fall over on the sidewalk apparently dead, for instance, and then they would explore the pockets.

Men are foolish for carrying around large sums of money anyway. Drafts are cheap, and they may be mailed to yourself, if you happen to be going on a journey. If you have to carry a large sum on your person, keep your hand on it every minute. Hundreds of cases of large sums being lost in this way are reported to the police of the big cities every year, and here is a significant thing, too—not all the cases are reported. In fact, scores of men get robbed who don't admit it because of the chagrin. That's human nature. There is another thing that it is

well for men to know, and that is that the ordinary safety attached to a watch or scarf pin doesn't bother the pickpockets very much. Never wear a valuable scarf pin or watch unless the safety catch is sewed into the lining of the vest pocket or the reverse side of the tie. Any man who wears a valuable pin is regarded as an easy mark by the professional pickpocket. The safety catch on one end may keep the pin from falling out, but it doesn't bother the pickpocket. I have had old hands at the game tell me that they had worked for months, loosening the safety with the thumb and third finger, while they took the stone with the first two fingers.

It is the same with the safety on the watch. The pickpocket simply slips his fingers into the pocket and unfastens the safety. The easiest mark of all though is the man who wears his watch on a fob. That is an especial temptation to every pickpocket. All you have to do is to pull up. "Easy pulls," they call them in the trade.

Usually when a man has his pocket picked, he will cast his suspicions upon the poorly dressed man, if such a man happens to be standing near him. But that's another case in which invariably he is wrong. All clever pickpockets are well dressed, and many of them appear to be "refined and dignified." So, beware of the well-dressed man who sits or stands uncomfortably close to you. Also, look out for the man who thrusts a newspaper between your eyes and your scarf pin or your pocketbook. He may be using the paper as a screen while he takes your valuables. That is a favorite trick of the pickpockets, and works to advantage in a crowded car.

The man who gets too deeply interested in his evening paper is one of the men most frequently robbed. Here is another thing to remember. The man who sits or stands so close to you, with one hand out of sight, may be honest, and again he may be "crossing his mitts" on you, as the pickpockets say. By the way, that is an instance of the art of picking pockets. The pickpocket may sit down beside his victim and cross his arms casually. Suppose his victim is on his right. Does the pickpocket move his right arm? Not in the least, for that might betray him. He keeps that arm perfectly still and does the work with the hidden left hand.

Another thing to watch out for, is the man who steps on your toes, or breathes in your face. Pickpockets resort to dozens of different ways to distract your attention from your pocketbook. Usually, if they are clever, you think nothing of the jostling, but as the natural bumping about of the crowd. However, if you resent it, many gangs of pickpockets carry a bully to stay behind and do the fighting. Usually you won't be bumped about very severely until the pocketbook is lifted, if indeed it becomes necessary to handle you a bit roughly at all.

A gang of pickpockets was working in a street car. One member of the "mob," edging up to the intended victim, stepped on his foot.

"Get off my foot," said the victim, suspecting nothing in his anger at being trampled upon.

"It's off," said the "tool."

The victim, of course, thought he referred to the foot, and said "It's about time."

Instead, the "tool" meant the remark as a signal to his confederates that he had extracted the pocketbook, and was ready to make the get-away.

That's the way the "mob" works. The different members are total strangers apparently, and do not speak to each other as a rule. But they have signals by which they co-ordinate their actions.

If men would take only a few reasonable precautions, and keep their wits about them—but then, most of them lock the stable after the horse is stolen.

This is the first of two stories by Chief Murnane. The other will appear in an early issue.



Beware of the man who thrusts a newspaper under your chin in a crowded car—he may be using it as a screen, as in this picture posed by the detectives. Actually, an accomplice would be standing on either side to obscure the view shown in the picture of the watch being taken.