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Keen

Private Eye

CPYRGHT BY BILL SURFACE

CPYRGHT

VINCENT GILLEN is a big, intense, curly-haired man of 57 who speaks slowly and softly when describing his profession, then enters a phone booth to go to work and instinctively shouts: "Stick on him, you hear!"

Gillen's job primarily is to follow people and ferret out personal information that most individuals would prefer to keep dormant. He is a private detective—the one who investigated Ralph Nader, the automobile critic, for General Motors, and whom Nader has recently named as co-defendant in a \$26-million law suit—and he maintains that he just possibly may be the best. "I've promoted the Great Gillen's status to real-life Agent 006%," he volunteers, smiling ambiguously. "Nobody should try to outdo the famous 007."

Not even the fictional 007 has Gillen's variety of cases. In a recent and reasonably typical week he was investigating these questions:

What was a mining company's motive on Wall Street in suddenly propagandizing a "valuable," but actually old and inaccessible, gypsum deposit? (Answer: To strengthen its position in a proposed merger.)

Who repeatedly sent vile telegrams and wrote messages on a West 41st Street sidewalk, signed "Idiot Turk," about a fabric company? (Answer: A "crackpot who won't do it again.")

Was an oil company's office on Fifth Avenue wiretapped in order to steal merger plans? (Answer: Yes.)

What were the real name and address of a female Hawaiian dancer at a mid-Manhattan hotel who secretly took lessons in Mandarin dialect? (The answer was obtained for a client Gillen believes to represent the G.I.A.)

How could a subpoena be served on an evasive theatrical figure with the expiration

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time only three hours away? (Answer: Inside a Saks gift box.)

Was a "prominent physician," who often left his wealthy young fiancée in an automobile while he raced inside hospitals on "urgent calls," really a graduate of Harvard Medical School and an outstanding surgeon? (Answer: He was not even a doctor and already had a wife and three children on Long Island.)

And, finally, who keeps stealing those gold-lettered name plates from Gillen's front lawn and office parking lot in Garden City, L.I.? So far, five have been swiped. (Answer: Probably teen-agers; Gillen has turned the case over to the Garden City police.)

THE private-eye business has been booming in recent years. "Nearly everybody's making private investigations a growth industry," says Gillen. "I've worked for three-fourths of Fortune's list of the top 500 corporations—investigating executives' behavior, or thefts of company secrets, looking for eavesdropping devices, anything the client wants. Check on an executive's wife or prospective son-in-law, or get evidence to sue or fight law suits. Then, law firms hire us to get evidence for everything from criminal defense to swindle cases."

New York State alone has 703 licensed detective agencies, twice as many unlicensed investigators and innumerable freelances such as some of the 2,300 (out of 4,700) former F.B.I. agents listed in a brochure as "available to do investigations." Still, detective agencies, in general, remain known as a shadowy area heavily populated with discharged policemen, incompetent hacks and unethical motel crashers. "When you just see some of these tacky private eyes," Gillen concedes, "you'd know why the investigator ranks at the very bottom of our social scale."

Gillen had a better reputation when he entered the business in 1957. He had worked in related fields as an F.B.I. agent (1935-37), insurance investigator, personnel director, attorney and professor of labor management at Hofstra University. Then, several former F.B.I. agents organized a chain of pre-employment investigative agencies, called Fidelifacts, to be operated by ex-F.B.I. men in 25 cities, and offered Gillen the New York area franchise. With Fidelifacts' reciprocal arrangement, Gillen could furnish nationwide information on prospective employes without charging travel expenses.

So many customers asked Gillen to discreetly investigate other problems that he now has, besides his Fidelifacts business, some 6,200 nonemployment cases a year, handled by 33 employees, his wife (Irene) and his son (John). Though his organization's size does not begin to approach the older Pinkerton and William J. Burns detective agencies—much of whose business involves guard service and plant security—it is one of the largest strictly investigative agencies.

ONE reason for Gillen's growth is the increase in requests for "debugging" investigations. News about Government wiretapping and reports of sensitive recorders smaller than martini olives have fostered such widespread fear of being bugged that Gillen is no longer aired solely by businesses sensing that competitors or Government agencies monitor their conversations, but by husbands who suspect their wives have them bugged. One corporate vice president called in Gillen because he "just knew" that another vice president in his own company had wiretapped his phone to beat him out of a promotion.

Gillen finds eavesdropping devices in 11 per cent of such cases. He estimates that about 10,000 illegal eavesdropping gadgets are in operation in New York. A typical case came from a large firm's chief executive. Though he had shifted all important meetings from his board of directors' room to his own apartment on Park Avenue, his competitor's decisions on prices, research,

training and marketing still showed that the rival heard all pertinent discussions. "Man, he's been getting everything," Gillen told his client, pointing to a transmitter, the size of a quarter, with no manufacturer's marks, hanging on a string behind a painting in the apartment.

Though Gillen removed that transmitter, he is not certain that the firm will remain debugged. "People who're bugging are a determined breed," he says. "A president of a manufacturing firm on Madison found a bug in his desk and got so scared that he discussed business only in his car. Then we found a magnetic device shaped like a cigarette package under his dashboard. It transmitted conversations five blocks away. And bug men are improving their art every day. We just found a transmitter secreted in the pendulum of a grandfather's clock in a small financial house on Wall Street. Just ingenious."

How does he foil these ingenious plots? "It's so hard to find good antbug men that my son went to electrical school to learn it," Gillen says. "We use mine detectors, sure, but you still can't beat the inch-by-inch physical search of a suspected area." Does Gillen, as do many private eyes, expand antbugging techniques by installing bugs for other clients? "No, sir, that's illegal and the work of acknowledged crooks," he said, testily drawing his hands against his barrel chest. "I've never bugged and don't even know who installs them. Well, uh, a few." He smiled, moving one to ask: "Like who?"

"Look here," Gillen continued, throwing up his hands. "big corporations come to us concerned over possible Government suits for antitrust or price-fixing, and we find their premises bugged or wiretapped, and we watch couriers pick up tapes and deliver them right to the Government agency in question. Well, that's not Macy's pecking on Gimbels."

Gillen is inclined to be cautious about the expense and unreliability of eavesdropping devices. To monitor an office with 10 trunk lines requires 20 transmitters and recorders that cost about \$200 each, plus \$500 to \$1,000 for installation, plus the salary, for some sneaky character to collect