

# ON THE FLOOR OF THE LIBRARY

Simeon Strunsky (1879–1948)

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Unfortunate people who never read detective novels; or, worse still, those who pick up a mystery story and wonder what in the world anyone can see in the book to keep him up till 1:30 in the morning with intermittent trips to the cold meat in the ice-box; or, worst of all, those who read the first chapter and then turn to the end to see who did the killing—such unfortunates think they are sufficiently kind when they describe the habit as a mild vice, not so hard on the family as liquor or drugs, but pernicious for the eyesight. They think they are 100 percent charitable when they tolerate the practice as one form of escape from the realities of a difficult world.

To such outsiders it is not given to understand that the “Mystery of the Chintz Room” or the “Smile of Gautama” is not an escape from the world, but an initiation. They simply do not know that a selected course in reading from Conan Doyle to Carolyn Wells is a guide to the institutions, culture, and life outlook of the nations from China to Chile. I have set down below a mere fragment of the picture of humanity which may be built up by devoting not more than one evening a fortnight to this field of research hitherto neglected by the sociologists. The list might easily be multiplied by twenty.

- (1) The common belief that the British are an open-air people is utterly opposed to the facts. When a member of the British nobility or upper middle classes is found dead in his bed, with a mystic Oriental symbol scrawled in blood on the sheets, the mystery is rendered all the more baffling by the fact that all the windows are hermetically sealed, the door is locked from within, the transom has not been opened for years, and the ventilators are choked up—in fact, the plumbers were scheduled to arrive on the morning after the tragedy. If it were not for that grisly Oriental symbol, the obvious conclusion would be that the victim perished for lack of a breath of fresh air. Given such a bedroom—and nearly all fatal bedrooms in our fiction are of this kind—and it is a question which is the greater puzzle: how the murderer managed to get in and escape, or how the victim managed to keep alive until the murderer got at him.
- (2) Economy and resourcefulness are not among the virtues of the classes addicted to being murdered in their bedrooms or in their libraries. Twenty years after the tragedy the ghastly stain is still there on the floor. All attempts at erasing the spot in the course of twenty years have failed. What the scrubbing expense must have been, even if we reckon at a much lower rate than the prevailing scale of domestic wages today, is obvious. What the doctor's expenses have been in the way of treatment for nervous derangements inflicted by the ghastly stain on various members of the family is easily calculable. Yet no one in all these twenty years seems to have thought of replacing the blood-stained plank with a new one, at a trifling cost if done by day labor, and for a really insignificant sum if ordered from a collapsible bungalow manufacturer.
- (3) Week-end guests in British baronial mansions or in wealthy residences on Long Island drink too much black coffee before going to bed. Then they lie awake all night. That is why about 2 in the morning they hear that queer, shuffling footfall down the hall to which at the moment they attach no particular meaning and the dread significance of which they realize only next morning when the host is found dead on the library carpet with his eyes fixed in a ghastly stare on the ceiling.
- (4) The number of servants who have been in the employ of wealthy families addicted to violent deaths, for a period of forty years and up, and for whose fidelity the survivors can vouch as confidently as for their own husbands and wives, is truly astounding. Here, indeed, my friends the psychoanalysts may find the secret of my own passion for the mystery novel. Having in recent years never succeeded in keeping a house-worker for more than a couple of months, it is perfectly comprehensible how all my suppressed desires draw me to these faithful servants who stay forty years and then prefer to be the victims of cruel suspicion by the coroner rather than bring disgrace on the family. It is not over-stating the case to say that if only I could

find a plain cook who will stay with us for forty years, I am perfectly willing to take a chance at being found at the end of the period upon the floor of my library with the ivory-handled paper cutter through my heart. For that matter, I should welcome an unsuccessful attempt at murder if the assassin is not apprehended until he has found the paper-cutter. As it is, I have to tear the pages open by pulling with both hands from the top.

- (5) The victims of foul play in the best British and American families never, absolutely never, cut themselves when shaving, or scrape the skin, or raise a blister. That is how the investigator from Scotland Yard or from his private office in the Equitable Life Building is enabled to detect the cause of death in an almost imperceptible red spot under the chin which the local police have overlooked and which he immediately recognizes as the characteristic bite of the rare South American adder, *Megaloptera Bandanna*. That method, if applied to the average man after he has shaved a second time for the theater, would suggest that he had been done to death by the greater part of the reptilian fauna of the South American forests.
- (6) Closely allied to the preceding topic, it appears that the principal occupation of the inhabitants of South America is the manufacture or the jealous preservation of the secret of instantaneously deadly poisons unknown to modern science and leaving no visible after-effects, excepting, of course, the corpse.
- (7) Insurance premiums on the lives of the British nobility must be really enormous at Lloyd's. At least one-third of the members of the House of Lords are killed every year on the floor of their libraries or at the end of their yew walks close to the abandoned garden pavilion. But it is worse than that. If you have on the one hand the aged Duke of Beaucaire with an income of a million a year, and if you have on the other hand the third son of his fifth younger brother, who was wild at school and has lost himself somewhere on the Rand, and if you have no less than seven lives intervening between the scapegrace nephew and the ducal title, then these seven lives are sure to be wiped out by an earthquake or a fire or a marine disaster, and it only remains for the man who masquerades as the nephew (the real nephew having died of drink in Johannesburg) to come home and finish up the Duke.
- (8) Nearly everybody in a mystery novel is a consummate athlete. They escape the vigilance of the detective who is disguised as a taxi-driver, or the pursuing avengers, by getting into a taxicab at one door and leaving by the other while the cab is in motion. This will interest people coming home from the theater who have sometimes tried to open a taxi door from the inside.
- (9) The wealth of Burma and Tibet in priceless jewels would be enough to pay the German indemnity ten times over. An emerald like the Eye of Gautama, a sapphire like the Hope of Asoka, a ruby like the Doom of Dhalatpur—all of them stolen from the forehead of sacred images by European adventurers—would be enough to finance British trade with Russia for the next fifty years. The fields in Burma and Tibet are cultivated entirely by women. The male population consists solely of priests, who are off in the West for the purpose of recovering the hallowed jewels and visiting the vengeance of Brahmaputra on the sacrilegious plunderers. Usually they are disguised as elevator runners at the Savoy or the Saint Regis.

People who do not know think detective fiction is a vice, whereas, it is, like Mr. H.G. Wells, a liberal education.

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