EDMUND LESTER PEARSON

THE LIBRARIAN AT PLAY

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The Librarian at Play

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Table of Contents

THE INTEREST GAUGE

Table of Contents

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"We are thinking of calling them 'interest gauges,'" said the agent, "but perhaps you can suggest a better name."

I took one of the little instruments and examined it. Hardly over an inch long, with its glass tube and scale, it resembled a tiny thermometer. The figures and letters were so small that I could not make them out, though they became clear enough through a reading-glass.

"Interest gauges," I remarked, "sounds like something connected with banks. I should think you could find a better name. Who invented them?"

The agent looked important.

"They were invented," he explained, "by Professor Dufunnie, the great psychologist. They are a practical application of psychology. Let me show you how they are used. Allow me—I will take this book—the 'Letters of Junius,' and attach the interest gauge. Here in the back, you see, the gauge is invisible to the reader. You will notice now, if you look through the glass, that the gauge marks zero. No one is reading the book, we have not even opened it, and the human mind is not acting upon the book. If you will take it into your hand, and look down at the gauge through the glass, you will see probably some little agitation of the liquid within the tube. You do, do you not? I thought so. That is because you are probably already familiar, to some extent, with the 'Letters of Junius' and the recollections that they arouse in your mind are exerting themselves upon the fluid.

Now, if you will oblige me, open the book and read attentively for a few moments."

I did so, and then handed it back to the agent.

"Look," he cried, "as soon as you cease reading, the fluid sinks back to zero. But the little aluminum arrow remains at the highest point which the fluid reached—that is, the highest point of interest which you felt in the book. Ah, yes—40 degrees—a faint interest. You will notice that the degree-points are marked at intervals with descriptive phrases—40 is 'faint interest,' 30 is 'indifference,' 20 is 'would not keep you awake after 9 P.M.,' and so on."

The thing was very fascinating.

"It is astounding," I said, "for that is exactly my feeling towards Junius, and yet I tried to get more interested in him than usual."

The agent laughed.

"You can't fool the gauges," he said. "You can't do it, even when you know one is attached to your book. I need not say that it is absolutely correct when the reader is not aware that there is a gauge upon his book. You must see the value of these to a librarian. Let me show you how incorruptible they are. Have you something there in which you have absolutely no interest—some book or article that is dry as dust?"

I looked about.

"This pretty nearly fills the bill," I said, and I handed him a copy of a library magazine with an article by Dr. Oscar Gustafsen on "How to Make the Workingman Read the Greek Tragedies."

The agent attached an interest gauge, and told me to read Dr. Gustafsen's article, and to try as hard as I could to become interested; to pretend, if I could not feel, the greatest excitement over it. I did so, and strained every muscle in my brain, so to speak, to find something in it to interest or attract me. It was no use—the fluid gave a few convulsive wabbles, but at the end the little arrow had not even reached 10, or "Bored to Death."

Then the agent took a copy of "The Doctor's Dilemma," and putting an interest gauge on the volume, asked me to read a few pages, and to remain as indifferent as possible. I read it calmly enough, but the liquid in the tube mounted slow and sure, and when we examined the arrow it pointed to 80.

"Try it on this," said the agent, handing me Conan Doyle's "Round the Fire Stories."

I put on an interest gauge and read the tale of "The Lost Special." The arrow shot up to 98 before I had half finished the yarn.

"The highest that the gauge will record, you see, is 140, though we guarantee them to stand a pressure of 165. They are not often subjected to anything like that. The average novel or short story to-day does not put them under a very severe strain. The greatest risk we run is from authors reading their own books. We had an especially dangerous case the other day, during some tests in the laboratory. We had a young author reading the proofs of his first book, and we put on a high pressure scale, capable of recording up to 210, and even then we took off the gauge only just in time. It had reached the limit, and there were danger signs."

"What are danger signs?" I asked.

"The liquid begins to boil," he said, "and then you have to look out for trouble. Now how many of these will you take? I can let you have a trial dozen for $4, or two dozen for $7.50. Two dozen? Thank you. You attach them in the back of the book—so fashion—or if the book is bound with a loose back, then you put them down here. There is no danger of their being seen, in either case. Here is our card, we shall be very pleased to fill any further orders. Thank you. Good day!"

As soon as he had gone I left my office, and went out into the public part of the library. I had started for the reading-room, when I heard my name called. It was Professor Frugles, the well-known scientific historian. He is giving his course of lectures on "The Constitutional Development of Schleswig-Holstein" and I had attended one or two of them. They had already been going on for two months—and although he lectured four times a week, he hadn't progressed beyond the introduction and preliminaries. Both of the lectures I had heard were long wrangles in which the professor devoted his energies to proving that some writer on this subject (a German whose name I did not catch) was wholly untrustworthy. I was told by some of the most patient listeners that so far no single thing about Schleswig-Holstein itself had been mentioned, and that it did not appear to be in sight. The course consisted merely of Frugles' opinions of the authorities.

Now the professor came slowly toward me, wiping his face with a large red handkerchief and waving his cane.

"Got any new books?" he shouted.

I told him we had a few, and took him back into one of the workrooms. He examined them.

"This will do; I'll look this over," and he picked up something in German.

I offered him another—in English, and, as I thought, rather interesting in appearance.

"Pah!" he ejaculated, as if I had put some nauseous thing under his nose, "popular!"

He exploded this last word, which was his most violent term of condemnation, and ran through the rest of the books.

"Well, I'll take this into the reading-room and look it through," and he started with the German book.

I prevailed upon him to take the other as well, and he consented, with a grunt. He did not notice that I had slipped an interest gauge into both of them.

After a bit, I followed him into the reading-room. He was in a far corner, hard at work. Mrs. Cornelia Crumpet was engaged in conversation with Miss Bixby, the reference librarian, when I came in.

"Oh, here's Mr. Edwards!" she exclaimed. "Why, what a library you have! I can't find anything at all about the Flemish Renaissance and I do not know what I shall do, for I have to read a paper on it to-morrow afternoon before the Twenty-Minute Culture Club. Miss Bixby was just saying she would get me something. Now what would you advise? There is nothing at all in the books I looked at."

"Perhaps you looked in the wrong books," I suggested, observing that she had a copy of "Thelma" under her arm.

"Oh, Mr. Edwards, how ridiculous of you! I'm carrying this book home for the housemaid; she's sick in bed, and the cook said she was homesick and threatened to leave. So I said I would get her something to read to occupy her mind. This is fearful trash, I suppose, but I thought it would keep her contented until she got well. But I do wish you would tell me what to consult about the Flemish Renaissance."

"Mrs. Crumpet," I said, "Miss Bixby knows more about that subject in one minute than I do all day, and I advise you to let her prescribe."

Mrs. Crumpet agreed to wait, while Miss Bixby went for the books.

"Where's that copy of 'Thelma'? I put it down here. Oh, you have it, Mr. Edwards! Well, you had better let me take it; I'm sure it is too frivolous for you serious-minded librarians to read. I'll sit here and look it over until she comes back with those books."

She took it, interest gauge and all, and sat down.

Miss Larkin came into the room just then and asked me to come over to the children's department.

"I want to show you," she said, "what an interest these children take in serious reading and non-fiction. It is most encouraging."

When we arrived at the children's room she had two or three small persons arranged about the desks.

"Now, Willie," she said, "which do you like best, story-books or nature books?"

Willie answered with great promptness: "Nacher books."

The others all confessed to an extraordinary fondness for "hist'ry" or "biography" or "nacher."

I asked Miss Larkin's leave to try a little experiment, and then explained to her the workings of the interest gauges. We chose Willie as a subject for our investigations, and gave him a copy of one of his beloved "nacher" books, with a gauge attached. Five minutes' reading by Willie sent the arrow up to 30, but the same time on "The Crimson Sweater" sent it up to 110.

"He seems to like Mr. Barbour better than the Rev. Dr. Fakir, Miss Larkin—I'm afraid that his enthusiasm for 'nacher' is in accordance with what he knows will please you. Why don't you use your influence with him to lead him toward truthfulness? It's a better quality, even, than a fondness for non-fiction."

As I went back I met Professor Frugles.

"Let me have this, as soon as it is ready to go out," he said, brandishing the German work; "this other—trifling, sir, trifling!"

And away he went.

But I noticed that the German book had only sent the gauge up to forty, while the "trifling" work, which had caused him to express so much contempt, had registered seventy-five.

At the issue desk was Mrs. Crumpet, having her books charged. As there were no gauges on the books about the Flemish Renaissance, I had no data to go on, except the fact that although she declared she had "skimmed through" them all and found them "very helpful," she had not, so far, cut any of the pages. I did not mention this to her, as she might have retorted that we ought to have cut them ourselves. Which was quite true.

But while she talked with Miss Carey, I managed to extract the gauge from "Thelma." At least, I took away the fragments of it. The arrow had gone up to 140, and trying to get still higher the little glass tube had been smashed to bits.

THE GARDENER'S GUIDE

Table of Contents

THE GARDNER'S GUIDE

I was looking over the proof sheets for some Library of Congress catalogue cards when I observed the name of Bunkum—Mrs. Martha Matilda Bunkum was the full name, and I was further privileged to learn that she was born in 1851. Everyone knows Mrs. Bunkum's two great works: "Handy Hints for Hillside Gardens," and "Care and Cultivation of Crocuses." Now, it seemed, she had accumulated all her horticultural wisdom into one book, which was called "The Gardener's Guide, or a Vade Mecum of Useful Information for Amateur Gardeners, by Martha Matilda Bunkum." The Library of Congress card went on to say that the book was published in New York, by the well-known firm of Ponsonby, Perks & Co., in the year 1911. It brought tears to my eyes, recalling the days when I, too, was a cataloguer, to see that the book had "xiv, 7, xv, 27, 316 p., illus., plates.", and moreover was 19 centimeters high.

As soon as I had recovered from my emotion, I pressed the electric bell three times—a signal that brings Miss Anderson, the head of the order department, into my office, unless she happens to be arranging her hair before the mirror in the stack-room at the moment. This time she came promptly.

"Miss Anderson," I said, "we must get a copy of Mrs. Bunkum's 'Gardener's Guide.'"

She instantly looked intelligent and replied, "We have one here now, on approval; it came in from Malkan this morning," and she hurried out to get it.

When I had the book, I regarded it lovingly.

"I wish I knew what the 'A. L. A. Book List' says about this," I pondered.

"It will be along in a couple of months," said Miss Anderson, "and then we can find out."

I told Miss Anderson to keep the book, anyhow, and to have this copy charged to my private account.

That night, on the way home, I expended $1.65 for flower seeds. They were all put up in attractive little envelopes, with the most gorgeous pictures on the front, representing blossoms of tropical splendor. On the backs was a great deal of information, as well as Latin names, confident prediction of what a dazzling mass of bloom the little packets would bring forth, and warnings "not to plant these seeds deeper than one-sixteenth of an inch."

All but the sunflowers. I could not get any sunflower seeds in packets, and finally had to get them in a paper bag —an enormous lot of them, for five cents. But there were no pictures, and no directions about depth. All this, I reflected, would be forthcoming from the pages of Mrs. Bunkum.

On the following evening, in company with Jane, I went forth to sow. Jane had the "Gardener's Guide" and I took certain tools and implements. By the time I had a trench excavated a little shower came up, and Jane retreated to the veranda. I had on old clothes and didn't mind.

"Jane!" I called, "look up Mrs. Bunkum and see how deep to plant sunflower seeds."

All the directions on the little packets were so precise about depths—some seeds an inch, some half an inch, and some (the poppies, for instance) only a sixteenth of an inch below the surface—that I was tremendously impressed with the importance of it all. Previously, I had thought you just stuck seeds in any old way.

But the rain was coming down harder now, and my spectacles were getting blurred. Jane seemed to be lost in admiration of the frontispiece to the "Gardener's Guide."

She began to turn the leaves of the index rapidly, and I could hear her mutter: "Q, R, S—here it is. Scrap-book, screens, slugs, sowing, spider on box. Oh, I hate spiders! Sunbonnet, sun-dial, sweet peas. Why, there isn't anything about sunflowers!"

This annoyed me very much.

"Jane," I said, "how perfectly absurd! Do you suppose an authority like Mrs. Bunkum would write a book on gardening, and not mention such common things as sunflowers? Look again."

She did so, but presently shouted back: "Well, I don't care! It goes right from sun-dial to sweet peas, and then Sweet William, and then to the T's—Tigrinum and Tobacco Water. I don't see what this 'Sunbonnet' means, do you? Perhaps it's a misprint for sunflower. I'll look it up—page 199."

Presently Jane found the reference she was hunting, and read it to me, leaning out over the rail of the veranda.

"Unless a woman possesses a skin impervious to wind and sun, she is apt to come through the summer looking as red and brown as an Indian; and if one is often out in the

glare, about the only headgear that can be worn to prevent this, is the old-fashioned sunbonnet. With its poke before and cape behind, protecting the neck, one really cannot become sunburned, and pink ones are not so bad. Retired behind its friendly shelter, you are somewhat deaf to the world; and at the distant house, people may shout to you and bells be rung at you, and, if your occupation be engrossing, the excuse 'no one can hear through a sunbonnet' must be accepted."

Jane read this with the liveliest interest, and at its conclusion remarked: "I believe I'll get a blue one, in spite of her!"

I sneezed two or three times at this point, and asked her to try again for sunflowers.

"Look here," I suggested, "I've noticed that index. Perhaps sunflowers are entered under their class as hardy annuals, or biennials, or periodicals, or whatever they are. Look 'em up that way."

She did so.

"Nothing under 'Hardy annuals,'" she announced, "except 'hardy roses'; under 'Biennials' it says 'see also names of flowers.'"

This made her laugh and say: "Here's a librarian getting a taste of his own medicine. No, it gives a reference to page 117. Here it is: 'There are but few hardy biennials. The important ones, which no garden should be without, are: Digitalis, and Campanula Medium.' Why, I thought Digitalis was something you put in your eye!"

"Did you look under 'periodicals'?" I retorted. "I could put something in *her* eye! Did you look under 'periodicals'?"