



THE BOOK THAT SIGHED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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EVEN AN OLD SUN IS WARM

George and Ethel were rosy, round and a ripe old age. They were both short of money, hair, and a good pair of knees but this never stopped them going on holiday. It also never stopped Ethel telling George what and how to pack, and only his good nature stopped him emptying the suitcase over her head. When the weatherman forecast a heatwave, George had thought of Blackpool, but Ethel wanted a real journey, to Scotland this time. After 56 years together it was hardly expecting too much. It was expecting a lot of their old car, which had creaked its way north, the occupants steaming with the heat as much as the engine. Eventually an overheated engine had called a halt; George knew exactly how the engine felt.

They arrived on the shores of Loch Shiel early in the afternoon. The small hotel opposite the water was affordable and peaceful, surrounded by hills of heather, and rocks ground down by time. A peaty stream tumbled through the rocks nearby, happily skipping its way to the loch. Just visible up the loch was the Green Isle, a small grassy mound topped by a ruined chapel. The landlady

explained that it was dedicated to St. Finan, a holy man in old times. The isle had been a site of pilgrimage, and on the hillsides you could still see the stones marking the paths to the isle, looking like lonely soldiers marching to long-lost villages. The loch cooled George and Ethel's tempers and the good tea ensured they were not about to lose their rounded shapes. George admitted this place was quieter than Blackpool, but he still missed the beach. Practical as usual, Ethel had a solution. There was a beach nearby at Kentra Bay and, although it was late afternoon, Midsummer's day in the north-west Highlands ensured good light for many hours.

They arrived on an empty shoreline. The distant islands floated above the haze and the white shell sands reflected the turquoise of the sea. The heat on the ancient rocks seemed to make the air heavy and slow. George and Ethel soaked up the sun like a pair of lazy leatherback turtles. Ethel lay face down on the sand, busily rearranging the sand as she snored. George sat back, gazing lazily at the quiet waves. Through the haze, he vaguely noticed the occasional bird drifting its way home across the water. One bird seemed in a hurry and he imagined it getting a mouthful for staying out too late with the lads at the local cliff. It must have been feeling very guilty tonight because it seemed to be travelling

faster and faster. It was when it instantly changed direction towards them and accelerated that George focused.

‘Look at THAT!’ George shouted.

Ethel snorted a bit of the beach up her left nostril, rolled upright and spluttered a mixture of sand and abuse. She was silenced by the look on George’s face and looked to where he was pointing. Low across the water something was coming at them extremely fast.

The silence held their breaths as the shape flashed overhead, their upturned faces reflected on a mirror underside. Their wide eyes met, just as a wall of sea spray hit them and the sand around was blown into the air. Ethel helped George to his feet just in time to see the small speck vanishing over the hill towards Loch Shiel.

Ethel was already striding back to the car. ‘Come on, let’s follow it!’

George was not so sure. Things like this did not happen in Blackpool. Trams or buses did not sneak up – you knew where they were going, and they approached at a sensible speed. The only things in the air now were robber seagulls and one fluorescent kite attached to a small child. But George could predict one thing: stay behind and Ethel would make this holiday miserable.

With his mind screaming ‘Stay!’ his body calmly got in the car and they drove back to the loch.

The loch was as peaceful as when they had left. George parked the car and they walked to the hotel. The landlady was leaning on her gate, looking at the loch. Ethel could hardly contain herself.

‘Did you see anything fly up the loch?’

The landlady kept staring at the loch. ‘Och, we’ve jets on exercise around here, things flying so low they frighten the lambs with the noise.’

‘But what we saw was silent. Strangest thing, nothing like a jet. It frightened me half to death.’

George noted that it had scared him more than halfway and he was not sure when he would stop feeling scared.

‘Well, I may have seen something go up the loch. Quiet it was, like you said. Probably one of them hanging-gliders. More wind than sense if you ask me.’

According to her story everything was cosy and normal, but she had a puzzled look, as if a local sheep had just said ‘Hello!’ and was now calmly chewing the grass the way it had always done. Ethel was getting excited. George could tell because her voice became precise and quiet, just like it did when she was trying to get him to admit he had broken something.

‘And what did this “some-thing” look like?’ Ethel enunciated slowly.

‘Difficult to tell against the hill, but it seemed to slow as it got to the Isle.’

‘Do - you - mean - it - landed - there?’ Ethel’s words were getting very precise.

‘Yes, - it - did - seem - to - land - there. Didn’t - you - see - it?’ articulated the landlady, copying Ethel’s way of speaking.

You could see Ethel was not used to someone using her method of getting information. She moved back slightly, coughed, and muttered a surprisingly quiet ‘No’. George was impressed and reminded himself to try the landlady’s technique.

‘George, I want to go onto that island. Now.’ Ethel had shifted into determined mode.

For a second, George had thought of trying out this new-found technique of communication but decided that defying a determined Ethel was unwise. Anyway, he might want to practise it alone before trying it out for real.

‘There’s a small motorboat at the jetty,’ the landlady explained, fully recovered. ‘If you want, I’ll ready it for you.’

‘There’s no need to go to all that trouble....,’ started George.

The landlady looked at Ethel with a satisfied smile. 'No trouble at all.'

'Thank you,' Ethel threw back over her shoulder as she strode towards the jetty.

Whether George was still shocked from his earlier experience or whether he knew that life was simpler this way, he found himself on open water heading up the loch. It was easier than he had thought. In fact, here in the open air he was quite enjoying himself. He could not help quietly smiling at seeing a rather pale Ethel gripping the rail with white knuckles.

Within ten minutes they were close to the Green Isle. The sun was lazing low over the hills, blushing its rays onto the ruined chapel in a warm caress. They tied the boat to the small landing stage and walked up the grassy slope. The island was small, and George reckoned it would only take ten minutes to walk around its edge. Dotted amongst the rocks and shrubs were tombstones, most of which were from the past 150 years, although a few were much older. George puzzled at the neatly cut grass and why someone should want to come all this way to mow the lawn, but a white shape amongst the rocks explained why. The local resident sheep was doing its efficient best, getting into all the corners a lawnmower could never reach.

The chapel lay on the top of the island, only its walls standing as testament to the past. An old bell was lying on the stone altar, daring anyone to pick it up and summon the ghosts. It should have been an eerie place, but the warm air and the light evening simply made it peaceful. They were almost back to where they had started and even Ethel seemed more at ease as she rounded the chapel wall.

That was when she saw them.

Ethel had been so sure she would find a spaceship with strange creatures. She had expected something extraordinary, but not this. Indeed, what was extraordinary was that they were so ordinary. After seeing the strangest event in your life, you do not expect to meet another grey-haired couple walking towards you, he in cotton shorts and her in a floral print dress. Ethel's impulse was to ask her where she had got the dress, but any words stayed frozen in her brain. George now realised that Ethel's chase had been a bit of nonsense. He briskly walked up to the couple and introduced himself and Ethel. The man smiled, saying, 'Hallo, I am Joseph, and this is Louise. Pleased to meet you.'

It was not often that George had seen Ethel lost for words. George, however, thought they seemed a nice

couple and invited them back to the hotel for a drink. Ethel felt better on the way back, especially after two whiskies at the hotel. Soon Louise and Ethel were enjoying each other's company. George felt at ease with Joseph and they got busy arranging some short trips in the surrounding area.

On the beach the next morning, the events of the previous evening faded in the warm clear air; it was a time to relax and chat with friends. The next few days were spent in each other's company – new friends who felt they had known each other for years. Ethel and George felt a genuine sadness as a few days later the couples waved goodbye to each other. It was only as George drove away that he realised that when they had met Joseph and Louise on the island, he had not seen or heard any other boat and he had no idea how they had got onto the island.

The names Joseph and Louise seemed to fit well enough, at least Louise thought so. Louise was still counting how long they had been together, whilst Joseph was still pretending he knew. She had wanted a quieter holiday this time, away from the bustle of busy ports or leisure centres. Joseph liked such places, but this holiday seemed pleasant enough without stretching their money.

They had needed some help learning the local language, but there had been so much time on the trip they had managed well enough. Renting transport had been difficult. The problem was finding an affordable runabout that could cope with a trip to the edge of the galaxy.

The journey had been pleasant, but meeting George and Ethel on the island had been a real surprise. Later in the hotel Ethel had talked excitedly about what they had seen and her disappointment at not finding a spaceship. Louise had smiled as she thought about the state of their transport – one of the power packs should have been replaced aeons ago, the cloaking device was stuck in ‘rock’ mode, and she dare not mention what the previous owners had been up to in the zero gravity chamber. Both it and they were past their best. Louise had no heart to tell Ethel that her aliens were just an old couple short on time and money, so Louise had left Ethel to her dreams. All four of them were getting older, but they still knew how to enjoy themselves.

Even an old sun is warm.

Notes: Even an Old Sun Is Warm

This was inspired by:

- A trip to Loch Shiel and the Green Isle one summer. St. Finan resided on the island in the 7th century. Later it became a place for burials and a site of pilgrimage.
- Asking why science fiction is always about the extraordinary. Modern life would have seemed extraordinary a hundred years ago, but is very ordinary today, almost boring. Joseph and Louise had no interest in how they had travelled. It was an ordinary holiday for them.