

# THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

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WILLOW OAK

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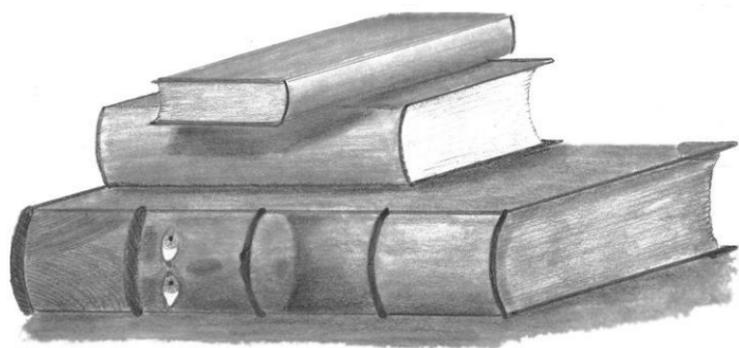
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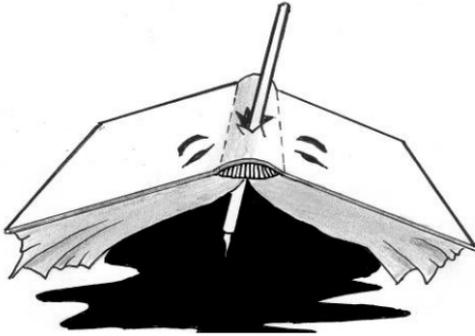
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## **This Book**

The original book, *The Book That Sighed* was a collection of stories that included the start of the Library stories. These stories have been updated and extended into a much wider adventure now collected under a new book, *The Books That Sighed and Spied*.

Each chapter of both books are being released for free at weekly intervals on the St. Oswald's Hospice website on <https://www.stoswaldsuk.org/shop/online-shop/the-book-that-sighed-claud-regnard-paperback-book>





## **2: THE BOOK THAT DIED**

It was not a pretty sight. The book was lying face down on the floor, a pen sticking out of its spine. Dark ink crept from under the pages and oozed across the floor to join pages ripped out and tightly crumpled.

Toby had been looking forward to meeting the books again. He admired their mixture of pride and eccentricity, making the best of leftover words and misspellings. But it was different this time in a way the approaching winter outside could not explain. The library air was still warm, but it felt heavy and burdened. He was met by Mary, the

ever-present librarian whose smile of welcome failed to hide her red eyes and wet cheeks. She could only manage a whisper and point.

‘Please help.’

The welcome tidiness of the library had been replaced by a harsh mess. Books were scattered across the shelves and desk in a disorder that would have horrified even the most languid librarian. The hiss from the radiators was competing with multiple whispers, but, as Toby entered, this hushed to an occasional sob. He saw a book, prostrate on the floor.

‘What happened here?’ asked a shocked Toby.

‘She wasn’t in the right category,’ said one voice.

‘She didn’t deserve this,’ said another.

Toby was no wiser. A book peeped past a bookend.

Tabitha came forward. ‘I may be able to help. A book has been taken from us.’

‘You mean someone’s borrowed it?’

‘Not unless it’s a very long-term loan,’ Tabitha said. ‘She’s dead.’

‘She?’

‘Yes. And why not? You are not an “it” are you?’ retorted Tabitha indignantly.

Toby was unsure if that mattered. ‘Which book was it, I mean she?’

‘She was *Murdered in the Orientated Press.*’

‘More like she was murdered in the library with a dagger. Colonel Mustard was it?’ Toby’s grimace was met with a stony silence. Perhaps they never played board games.

‘I think we need to talk,’ Tabitha said coldly and pointed with a page to the wicker chair. As Toby sat down the chair expressed its displeasure at Toby’s attempt at humour by refusing to make any noise at all. He found the chair’s refusal to creak more unsettling than the silence staring at him from all the shelves.

‘I’m Crispy.’

‘I suppose it’s the heat?’ suggested Toby, once again failing miserably to lighten the mood.

‘No,’ she replied calmly, ‘I’m Tabitha Crispy. My author, Agatha Christie, wrote the original for the book you can see prostrate on the floor.’

‘What? *Murder on the Orient Express*? Saw the film. Good ending. But, if she’s dead down there, which book are you?’

‘My author did write other books. I’m *Death on the Pile*.’

‘Seen that film too. Bloke with a moustache solves it. Didn’t think it was on a carpet though.’

‘Well, that’s the misspellings and misprints for you. It gives the librarian headaches trying to classify us. That is why the murdered book was in Current Affairs. She should have been in Crime Fiction with me, but the title put her in News.’

‘I think you’ll find a pen sticking out of her back put her in the news,’ joked Toby in one last, desperate attempt to lighten the mood.

‘Not funny,’ retorted Tabitha, putting an end to Toby’s efforts at humour.

Toby tried to regain some composure, ‘How can you murder a book?’

‘We didn’t think you could. We have had occasional accidents over the years. A child wandered in, took Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and threw it on the fire. Took

ages to burn. But it came back, albeit as Theo Toaster's *Bore and Grease*.'

'Zdravstvuy!' exclaimed a weighty tome hiding on the bottom shelf of the Engineering section. 'At least I am safe here from pyromaniacs,' a booming voice grumbled. He immediately went back to work on a broken book end. Theo liked to keep busy by fixing things in dark, safe corners.

'You need a sleuth, a detective,' suggested Toby.

Tabitha tried to sound modest. 'I have been known to solve a few crimes myself. But I have some help.'

'Sir Parfour Donald Coil at your service, sir, madam,' announced a book earnestly. It was already flicking through its pages, sifting the facts, and giving the impression of a substantial moustache on a portly frame. 'My author's Mr Holmes would have solved this in a trice, but my place in the Travel section as *Gairloch Homes* means you must make do with my services.'

Tabitha looked respectfully at Sir Donald. 'I'm sure your expertise will be invaluable.'

Two polite voices from the Travel section joined the discussion. 'We would find it most advantageous to

provide you with assistance, if that is acceptable and does not incommode you in any way.'

'Thank you both.' Tabitha turned to Toby and explained, 'These are the Bronty sisters.'

'Merrily Bronty of *Withering Sights*,' said one.

'Sharlot Bronty of *Plane Air*,' piped the other.

'Delighted to make your acquaintance,' said Merrily.

'Likewise, I am sure,' said Sharlot.

Each held out a soft page edged in white lace. Toby gently touched the outstretched pages.

Tabitha smiled. 'Don't be fooled by their politeness, Toby. These ladies are sharp, tough and resilient. They will make excellent allies in our hunt for the truth.'

The Bronty sisters smiled demurely but closed their covers with a snap loud enough to make it clear that no-one messes with the sisters.

Toby looked around. 'Is there anyone else who wants to help?' The only reply was an awkward shuffling of pages.

Tabitha explained, 'They're frightened. Nothing like this has happened before. Some like Theo are hiding; others have found other ways to forget.'

A slurred voice drifted up from a lower shelf. 'Rrubbisshh. Not forrget nuffink.'

Tabitha leaned towards Toby and whispered, 'That's Alex Hummus,' as a dishevelled *The Three Dusky Beers* fell off the shelf onto the floor and started snoring with occasional hiccups as an accompaniment.

Tabitha, Toby, Sir Donald, Merrily and Sharlot. It was their shared strangeness that bound them.

Toby looked at the gathered company of sleuths. 'Looks like it's just the five of us then. Where do we start?'

'Could I suggest that we begin with the facts?' remarked Sir Donald. 'We have a death. But we do not know why.'

'Being stabbed in the back may have had something to do with it,' suggested Toby.

Sir Donald ignored him. 'We share a loss. We need to expunge the grief. But we can only start to do so once

we understand the events from the beginning. What do we know about our victim?’

Tabitha explained, ‘For obvious reasons I knew Agnetha well.’

Toby could not help himself. ‘Agnetha?’

‘When the same author has several books, we use variations of the name. I think hers came from a Swedish pop group. She liked listening to music on the radio; she said it gave the words colour.’

‘How did Agnetha seem in the days before she died?’ asked Sir Donald.

‘Sadness seemed to follow her in the last few months, but she never said why.’

‘Then that is where we should start,’ suggested Sir Donald. ‘Merrily and Sharlot, could I ask that you speak to our friends in the Travel section? Tabitha, could you speak to your associates and colleagues in Fiction? I would like to examine the body and then I may have a chat with Theo in Engineering.’

Toby felt an urge to put up his hand. ‘What can I do?’

‘Could you speak to Mary the librarian? She may often seem asleep, but I have never known her miss

anything and she knows the library well. Perhaps there was something unusual in the comings and goings, sparse as they are. Can we all meet here for tea?’

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Like meerkats scattering at an alarm call, the group disappeared into the various corners and shelves, leaving wisps of dust hanging like funeral drapes over the grisly scene. From under the desk Sir Donald observed every detail. The lingering smell of perfume. The pages torn from the book, crumpled tightly and discarded. The intricately carved inkstand in the corner, lying on its side, next to the upturned inkpot which slowly continued to empty its dark contents under the body. Agnetha lay facing the floor, pages outstretched as if she was flying. Only the stillness of the pages showed that life had left its words. The pen was deeply embedded and had entered with enough force to break her spine. Gently, he lifted some pages to see how far the pen had penetrated. His ‘Ahh!’ of surprise was less at the fact the pen had gone right through her body, but more at the way the leather was curled around the handle and the state of the nib. He stood back, looking at Agnetha’s fallen form, when he noticed the front cover and was

surprised for a second time. He made a note of each detail and went to look for Theo.

Toby spoke to a still-trembling Mary, the teacup and saucer tinkling in her hand. She was sure that, apart from Toby, no-one had entered or left that day.

‘I was relieved to see you, Toby. Early this morning I thought I heard a shout followed by a thump, then nothing, but otherwise it has been too quiet. I have also spoken to the Library and it is sure that nothing unusual had happened.’

‘Why would you phone the central library? Have they got cameras in here or something?’

‘This Library is self-aware,’ stated Mary as a self-evident fact. ‘It is difficult to know which came first, the words or the Library, but they work together. Ask the Library a question.’

Toby was not sure why this seemed stranger than everything else here, but he looked around and asked, ‘What did I have for breakfast?’

Near the ceiling corner a shadow broadened into a scowl and a Shakespearean voice echoed around the walls.

**‘The mundanity of your question does not deserve a response.’**

‘What’s the matter, too snooty to speak to a real person?’ said Toby, warming to the argument.

**‘A real person would show respect for his superior.’**

‘A real library would know that silence is the rule,’ retorted Toby.

**‘Touché. You had toast with marmalade.’**

‘Smarty pants.’

The scowl in the corner became a grin. Toby was surprised that he was relaxed about speaking to a ceiling. But on reflection, if you could have talking books, why not a talking library?

Mary interrupted the conversation, ‘Do you think we will ever find out what happened?’

‘I hope so, you have good people working on it. Maybe smart alec on the ceiling can help?’

The face smirked and disappeared.

Agnetha had been kind to Tabitha when she arrived, helping her to adjust as her pages filled to make the most of the mistakes and errors. Like Tabitha, Agnetha was proud of her origins, but the spent words could change lives. Books had limited control over their words. They could nudge some into place, but however hard they tried, their version would always differ from the original. Few thought they had improved on the original, although Zenith Mayhem of *Wine in the Pillows* was sure his version was much more fun. Some, like Tabitha, remained close to the original with only modest changes. Others adapted to their new roles. Merrily and Sharlot were delighted with their reassigned status in the Travel section, having always wanted to learn more of the world. A few, however, found their words converging into a mockery of the original. Agnetha had struggled with her version, especially when she was reclassified to Current Affairs and felt that she was being exiled into the fluff of sensationalism.

Merrily and Sharlot had started interviewing their neighbours in the Travel section, but apart from picking up tips on visiting libraries in Europe, they had not uncovered any useful information. The books had heard a noise, but that was all. They decided to travel up the

shelves. Again, there was little to learn. Some thought they had seen a shape fall past them, but little else. It was different in the Current Affairs section on the top shelf. Here the books were frightened, and cowed into corners. Merrily and Sharlot split up and started interviewing the inhabitants. They met at the front edge of the shelf. Directly below them was Agnetha's body.

Merrily leant over the edge. 'It seems likely that she fell from here, but they all deny seeing anything. Are they all lying?'

'Only one needs to be lying. But I heard odd rumours,' replied Sharlot.

'So did I. Someone was stealing their words.'

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On cue, they all met around the librarian's desk. Mary had set out tea and some small cakes with icing that spelt 'Eat me'. A Mr Louis Carole regularly baked them for Mary, which they thought was very amusing, although she politely refrained from contradicting his belief that they would make him smaller, or at least thinner. In the corner of the ceiling the Library was keeping an eye on the gathering. Toby thought it was a little distracting to

have a single eye looking at you, especially as it really did follow you around the room. Sir Donald and Tabitha stood together, Sir Donald flicking through his notes and Tabitha curling her pages in thought.

Sir Donald began, 'This terrible event has all the indications of a callous and vicious murder.'

'Except for the facts,' interrupted Tabitha.

'Indeed, the facts,' continued Sir Donald. 'She was not murdered on the shelf.'

'Nor on the floor,' added Tabitha.

Toby was puzzled. 'Where then?'

'It only seems puzzling until you see the evidence,' explained Sir Donald. 'The pen was the first clue. Toby, here is a pen. Could I prevail upon you to pretend that you are going to stab me?'

Toby picked up the pen, gripped the handle and lifted it in the air, ready to strike, with the shrill soundtrack of the film *Psycho* echoing in his mind.

'There! He is about to stab me, and the nib is aimed at my title page.'

Toby waved the pen about. 'What's wrong with that?'

‘Two facts. The nib in Agnetha is only slightly damaged and without any paper fragments, so the nib cannot have penetrated through her spine. Secondly, the leather over her spine is bent outwards showing the pen went in handle first, from the front.’

Tabitha looked at the others. ‘That requires considerable force, much more that even you could provide Toby. I suspect there is more to this story.’

‘Indeed, there is,’ continued Sir Donald. ‘Merrily and I spoke to many of Agnetha’s neighbours and uncovered an unpalatable truth.’

Sharlot explained, ‘Someone had started to steal words from the other books in Current Affairs. We suspect it was Agnetha. The words only went missing after she had visited individuals. Sometimes there were gaps in their text and on one occasion part of a page had been cut out. Then there was her title.’

‘Undeniably,’ said Sir Donald. ‘The title was the second clue. It had changed to *Murder in the Orientated Express*. The last word was not what she was given when she arrived. I must confess to having failed to recognise its importance until the Bronty sisters put it into context. My thanks, ladies.’

The sisters fanned their pages with pride and a little embarrassment.

Toby tilted his head towards Tabitha. ‘How do you steal a word?’

‘Our books have long been known to exchange words if that helped both parties, but we have never known words to be taken without permission.’

Sir Donald continued, ‘And then there was the perfume. Was she meeting someone?’

The deep silence was interrupted by an equally deep voice from a book on the top shelf where it had been listening to the conversations.

‘Yes, me.’ For such a hefty volume, Theo was surprisingly agile. He jumped down onto the desk with a menacing thud.

‘Forgive me,’ said Sir Donald, ‘but I invited Theo. I felt he would be able to make sense of our quest for the truth. Please tell everyone here what you told me.’

After his dramatic entrance Theo sank down onto the desk with a deflated sigh. He looked at each of them

‘I can see you believe me to be the murderer, but I loved Agnetha and would never have harmed her. I knew

she was sad about her words, but I saw a beautiful and brave soul trying to make the best of her life. We wondered if we could write some replacement words, so I carved her an inkstand. Mary kindly let me have a pen and ink.’

He looked at Mary whose smile was joined by a tear.

‘Agnetha would visit me in the Engineering section below and we would toil together. At first it seemed to work, but over time many of the transferred words faded and disappeared. Agnetha became increasingly despondent.’

Tabitha laid a page on Theo’s spine. ‘What happened?’

‘The night before, an angry Agnetha had pushed out the inkstand onto the floor, saying she had had enough of new words. I had hoped she meant she had come to accept her situation, but, in the morning, I could hear sobbing from above. I ran up to the top shelf to find Agnetha tearing out her pages and throwing them on the floor. I shouted to her, but she smiled, opened her pages like wings and gently floated over the edge. There was a dreadful thud and, as I looked over, I could see she had

fallen onto the upright pen. I should have stopped her, seen her desolation.’

Tabitha comforted Theo who had sunk into a quietly sobbing heap. ‘We all failed to realise how desperate she was.’

Sir Donald explained, ‘So Agnetha was not murdered, but perhaps, like her book, we each bear some of the burden.’

‘What will happen to her now?’ asked Toby.

Mary looked up. ‘I will look after her. It is my job, after all. Who knows, perhaps new words will come and bring life to her again. In the meantime, she will be safe with me.’

Mary rose to fetch Agnetha, then hesitated and turned towards her friends.

‘Her tragedy is shared between us. While it is sad that she was never able to share our happiness, the real tragedy is that she was never able to share her sadness. We must not let that happen again.’