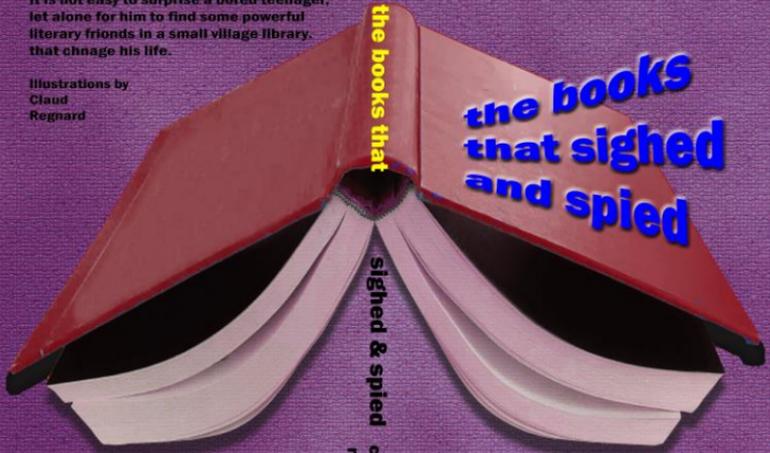


It is not easy to surprise a bored teenager,
let alone for him to find some powerful
literary friends in a small village library,
that change his life.

Illustrations by
Claud
Regnard



This edition sold in aid of
St. Oswald's Hospice
(Newcastle-upon-Tyne)
and Miral Hospice St.
Johns (Wirral)



THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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Names and characters are products of the author's imagination

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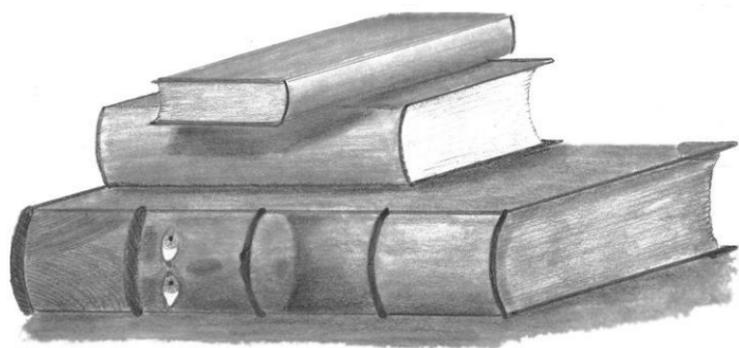
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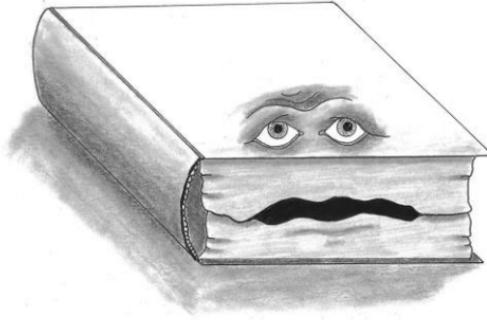
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This Book

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>





3: THE BOOK THAT LIED

It was hard enough going through life as you, without pretending to be someone else.

Toby had decided to visit the Library on the way home from school. Mary was doing her usual impression of being fast asleep. Her glasses had slipped studiously onto the tip of her nose and her lips wobbled as she exhaled a dainty snore. A slight wetness at the corner of her mouth knew better than to extend into an impolite dribble. A slender hand supported her librarian bun. Her little finger twitched slightly as she dreamt of a hunky book lifting itself from a lake, his soaked dust cover transparent against the well-tooled leather....

Mary awoke suddenly, looking a little flustered. ‘Hello, young master Toby. How can we help you today?’

‘I was wondering if some of the books would let me read them?’

‘I doubt they would allow you. How would you like someone rummaging through your clothes?’ Mary had an oddly faraway look. ‘However, they are always happy to read to anyone willing to listen,’ she added quickly before anyone could guess what was on her mind.

Toby trundled round the usual five or perhaps six familiar corners. He had got used to the Library’s habit of changing shape and suspected it did it out of impish delight. Not surprisingly for a section on talking books, they were busy exchanging words, debating ideas, chatting about new developments, and cleaning. Toby had never seen the Library so tidy. Even the dust particles were looking for a new home and, as he dropped his rucksack on the floor, not a mote was displaced.

A smiling Tabitha met him. ‘Welcome again, Toby. What can we do for you today?’

‘Mary said one of you might be willing to share your stories with me.’

‘What are you looking for?’

Toby briefly pondered games, girls, spots and food, but he suspected Tabitha was expecting something that might infuse a little improvement into his bored adolescent mind.

‘Anything on self-improvement?’ suggested Toby.

A book was already bouncing up and down in the Health section, sticking out a page like an eager primary schoolchild who knew the answer to 2+2.

‘I think we have a volunteer,’ smiled Tabitha with an eyebrow more raised than the comment deserved.

The book bounced down onto the desk.

‘Excellent choice!’ he said, despite the fact he had not been chosen. ‘I am Hector Houghtwo, and I would be happy to share my *oeuvre* which is entitled *Get the Power Monkeys to Scratch your Back*. My subtitle is *Mindful of Loch Ness*, although I suspect that part may have got muddled in the transfer.’

Toby had no idea what any of the titles meant. ‘What book are you from?’

‘It seems that misprints and misspellings from self-improvement books are rather numerous and I seem to

have collated many such books, but there is only one of me in this library.’ Toby was beginning to suspect one was going to be enough.

With more amusement than seem warranted, Tabitha said, ‘Have fun.’

Toby was unsure how much fun this was going to be, but Hector was undeterred.

‘With my help you will throw off the shackles of modern life, live at peace with yourself and see the world with different eyes.’

Toby thought sunglasses and some cider could do all that. But perhaps a little less stress would be good. Just getting up was stressful. He never understood why people liked the sunrise, when waiting for winter brought it to you at a sensible time. It also annoyed him that those arriving early were praised for their enthusiasm, but no-one ever noticed when he stayed late. ‘OK, what do I have to do?’

Hector was looking a little too enthusiastic for Toby’s liking. ‘First we will look at fighting stress.’

While the concept of relieving stress made as much sense to Toby as trying to make politics kinder by

hugging a politician, Toby was not sure that fighting was going to make him feel less stressed.

But Hector was in full flow, ‘We start by breathing.’ His pages arched around his sides. ‘In, one two three. Out, one two three. Continue. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Purifying air in, toxic stress out,’ Hector intoned in a voice that was meant to be relaxing but sounded soporific.

After a dozen excursions of breath, Toby was looking pale. ‘I’m starting to feel dizzy.’

‘Perhaps a little too much out,’ suggested Hector. ‘We will try a little relaxation. Sit in the chair.’

While Toby was settling in amongst the wicker chair’s customary groans and creaks, Hector went over to the Natural History section. He came back with *Glue Gannet Goo* which was still about the natural world and written by a famous TV naturalist but one who practised ventriloquism as a hobby. Hector whispered ‘Oceans’ and the book opened up to a two-page view of the Pacific, accompanied by the sounds of soft waves and distant whales.

‘Just relax and let each part of your body feel heavy.’

He started by instructing the toes to relax and worked his way up. By the time he got to Toby's neck, the repetitive, monotone voice had convinced Toby that Hector had a depressive illness serious enough to require immediate admission and treatment.

‘Are you feeling ok?’

‘A little tired. Perhaps we could continue tomorrow,’ admitted Hector.

Toby left Hector listening to waves and whales. Passing the librarian, Mary commented, ‘Did that help?’

‘Not yet,’ said Toby, ‘not yet.’ Mary smiled.

The next free weekend Toby got up early enough to surprise his parents and his brother in their dressing gowns. They had always believed a good breakfast to be essential to life, but Toby turned down the offer of a full English which only seemed to promise a full coffin. His mother's alternative of muesli and nuts always gave Toby the sensation of having eaten half a pound of lead. She had suggested some superfoods, but chips, cakes, chocolate and biscuits were all super as far as Toby was

concerned. Toby escaped with coffee and a croissant, mainly because they seemed mysteriously continental.

Hector was waiting when Toby arrived. 'I have made a list of strategies for you. A Toby Try-out Tour if you like.'

Toby suspected he would not like. 'What do you have?'

Hector went through his list.

Running was good for you, Hector maintained, but Toby had seen too many runners looking as if they were about to have a massive heart attack. It did not look like a fun way to die.

Hector suggested getting a cat would ease stress. Toby's Aunt Eddie had a cat that purred all day on the sofa, demanding only food, milk, warmth, shelter and the right to drop small animals on the carpet, some still alive. There seemed nothing relaxing about Aunt Eddie's cat.

Hector tried to explain mindfulness, but this made no sense to Toby who felt his mind was already too full and he could see no reason to cram more in. Looking at Hector's pictures of yoga, Toby thought it seemed suitable only for super supple people with nothing better to do than make their limbs into strange pasta shapes.

Toby already knew that eating pasta was much more comforting, even if it reduced his suppleness in places.

‘You’re not really finding this helpful, are you?’ suggested Hector.

‘I’m just finding it difficult to find something that makes sense to me,’ explained Toby. ‘What did you find most helpful?’

To Toby’s surprise, Hector burst into tears and shrank into a corner of the Nursing section. Toby placed a soothing hand on his sobbing spine, but this was quickly brushed aside by the starched white pages of a nursing manual whose determination to help removed any need for a blue flashing light. Toby retreated rapidly.

‘Step aside, young man!’ she said unnecessarily.

As she carefully lifted Hector’s page to check his pulse, Toby could read her front cover, *Votes on Nursing* by Flo Night in a Gale.

‘Have you quite finished staring at my front? Get this man a hankie!’

Flustered, Toby searched his pocket and handed Flo a paper tissue, hardly used.

‘If I had wanted used blotting paper, I would have asked for some.’ Flo dropped the tissue as if it contained plague. From a back page she pulled out a spotless white cloth and proceeded to wipe Hector’s tears. This had the desired effect and Hector’s sobbing settled into an occasional hiccup accompanied by a smug smile from Flo.

Tabitha joined them, having heard the noise and Flo’s commands.

‘Is everyone alright?’

‘Certainly not. This young man has offended dear Hector.’

Toby was clearly upset at the turn of events. ‘I-I didn’t mean anything. I only asked what he found most helpful to ease his stress.’

They turned towards Hector, but he had disappeared.

Long after Toby had returned home, they searched every corner of the Library. This was made more difficult because the Library had more corners than logical geometry allowed. Some corners had an annoying habit

of disappearing, precisely because it had more than its fair share of corners. This surfeit never bothered or embarrassed the Library since it liked to think it had cornered the market. This gave it an air of annoying smugness. On occasions it thought it fun to see someone navigate four right-hand corners but end up in a different room, or pass three left-hand corners and one right-hand corner, only to end up where they started. Most times it was content to allow individuals like Toby to reach their destinations, but this time it was puzzled. Despite searching the most ethereal corners, it could not find Hector.

Over dinner that evening Toby's mum asked him what sort of day he had had.

'None of your business,' said a voice from the hall behind Toby.

'What did you say?' asked Toby's dad. 'Don't speak to your mother like that!'

'I didn't..., ' started Toby but stopped when he recognised the voice. 'Sorry mum. It was interesting.'

His parents assumed this meant school had been productive, but Toby was not about to tell them the truth. ‘Please may I leave the table?’

Impressed by this sudden flowering of good manners, they agreed. Toby ran out, picked up the rucksack and disappeared to his room. He opened the bag and stared in. Hector stared back.

‘What are you doing in there?’

‘I needed somewhere to think. Your bag was nearest.’

Toby sat on his bed. ‘I’m sorry I upset you.’

‘Not your fault, it’s me, but I don’t really want to talk about it.’

Toby changed tack. ‘I didn’t know the books could leave the Library.’

‘Neither did I.’

‘I thought you’d burst into flames or get dragged away by demons on passing the Library threshold.’ Toby imagined dark shadows reaching out to pull the errant book into the abyss like the villains in *Ghost*, not that he would ever admit to having seen such a soppy film.

‘You’ve been watching too many films,’ Hector guessed with creepy accuracy.

They settled down to watch *The Shawshank Redemption*. Hector watched Andy Dufresne escape prison through a sewer pipe and realised he had been lucky to get out of the Library in a warm, dry bag. As they turned in for the night Hector remarked, ‘I’ll keep an eye out for monsters.’

‘You’ve been watching too many films,’ said Toby, but, in truth, he was pleased to have someone who would look out for... things.

From inside the rucksack a book smiled.

The next morning Toby got ready for school.

‘If you like I could drop you off at the Library after school.’

‘I’d like that, but can I make a request? Can I come back?’

‘Deal.’ Toby gave a high five to ten raised pages.

Hector promised not to make any comments over breakfast and was content to peek out of Toby’s rucksack on the way to school. He was not impressed by what looked like masses of disorientated lemmings, each

scurrying towards their personal cliffs, focused only on the inches in front of their feet. He thought they had far too many Power Monkeys scratching their backs.

On the bus Hector kept hearing ‘pops’ on the rucksack as if it were raining. Peeking out through a gap he noticed some boys chewing paper into pellets and blowing them through straws at Toby’s head. ‘What are they doing?’ whispered Hector.

‘Nothing, keep quiet,’ shushed Toby.

When they arrived at the school the same boys caught up with Toby in the cloakroom. Hector felt something hard hit him, followed by Toby falling to the ground. A boy with a snotty expression jumped on Toby’s back and demanded he hand over his lunch money. When Toby failed to reply he launched punches at Toby’s face. Hector saw his chance. Unzipping the rucksack, he reached out, pages open, and closed them with a crunch on the assailant’s nose. The boy sprang back, with blood starting to run down his lip. All he remembered afterwards was a wide grin disappearing back into Toby’s rucksack, an image that recurred like a nightmare each time he saw Toby. He turned and ran. The others followed, impressed at how Toby could punch so accurately behind his back.

‘Thank you, I don’t know what you did, but thank you.’

‘No problem. To be honest, I haven’t had this much fun in ages.’

On the way back from school Toby and Hector visited the Library. As he passed Mary, she wondered why Toby was smiling until she spotted a wide grin from inside his rucksack. ‘A warm welcome back, Hector.’

‘And to you too,’ said Hector with a spring in his voice that gave Mary a warm smile.

Even the Library was pleased, allowing Toby and Hector to travel past only one corner before arriving in front of a group of anxious faces.

Flo pointed angrily at Toby with a well-starched page ‘How dare you kidnap dear Hector!’

‘Flo, dear,’ interrupted Hector, ‘it was my decision to get into Toby’s rucksack. He knew nothing about it until he got home.’

‘But why?’ Flo seemed less than her usual prim self, softer perhaps.

Hector looked down at his footnotes and said, ‘I have a confession to make. All these wonderful therapies and

treatments that came my way seemed so sensible. I told people how they worked and why they worked.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ asked Flo.

‘I allowed everyone to think I had tried them all.’

‘What... not even the yoga?’

‘None of them.’

‘So, you...,’ Flo could not bring herself to continue.

‘Yes, I lied,’ admitted Hector.

There was a silence. Then Tabitha spoke up.

‘To be honest, Hector, we all suspected. What mattered is that you believed in it.’

‘Well, it mattered to me,’ said Flo, looking up with a slowly spreading grin. ‘I dare not say what some yoga positions did to my digestion.’ Everyone smiled.

‘I just wanted you to feel positive about yourself,’ sighed Hector.

Flo looked at Hector and gently rested a page on his spine, ‘But being positive all the time is like expecting a battery to work without a negative end. You can’t switch on a light unless you have both.’

‘That makes more sense than the stuff I was peddling. I’m going to try for a re-write, perhaps with a new title. I was thinking of *When Your Mind’s Full, Mind Less.*’

‘You’ll need a foreword explaining what a hero you are.’ Toby went on to explain his adventures that day. Everyone in the room clapped. Flo was positively glowing with pride. The book that had lied, sighed and then smiled.