

# THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

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REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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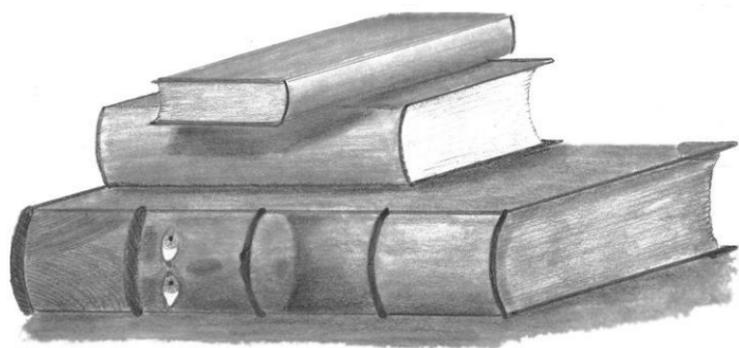
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## **This Book**

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>





#### **4: THE BOOKS THAT CRIED**

The nights were stealthily stealing the days. The trees glowed in their last sunset salutes as the mists gathered across the fields. The anticipation of warm fires and mulled wine held the bitter aftertaste of the cold dark nights to follow. But Toby liked this time of year; the silver brightness of the wooded lanes, the mysterious light filtering through hazy air and the nutty smell of damp piles of leaves scattering before his feet. It was a time to gather harvests and thoughts, but Toby was not prepared for a locked library door and a notice from the council.

*FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS HAVE  
FORCED THE COUNCIL TO MAKE DIFFICULT  
DECISIONS TO PRESERVE OTHER SERVICES.*

*WE ARE NO LONGER ABLE TO FUND  
THIS LIBRARY AND FROM THE  
31ST OCTOBER  
THIS LIBRARY WILL CLOSE.*

*BY ORDER,*

*CLLR JACOB CRUMBLE*

There was a time when Cllr Crumble would have used capital letters sparingly. Back then he was a thin slice of an accountant whose introverted shyness made him less assertive than an abacus. But he evolved to believe it was his right to make any pronouncement using only capitals. The cause of this transition was a steady rise through council strata. Like archaeological layers, these strata contained debris that stuck, and in Crumble's case all the detritus found a natural home. Whether you noticed the smell depended on how sensitive you were to the aroma of male oxen deposits. Multiple dining experiences at taxpayers' expense had created a dumpling that matched the heaviness felt in the pit of the stomachs of those who met him. His rounded face shone greasily around a bulbous nose overseeing thin, mean lips

that silenced criticism. The fondness he showed his pet dog did not extend to his family or colleagues, although many suspected the dog was just biding its time. He hated books that were not ledgers. He could see no point in the wasteful use of time and letters. He had no patience for stories that dragged through multiple plots, subplots and side-lines. Despite his profession, he could not account for taste. He was clear that the only worthwhile story was a balanced audit, but with a profitable addendum for him and his pals, details of which were in a notebook filed under “S” for skimmed off the top. When Crumble said a project was interesting, he meant ‘with interest’.

‘This is an interesting project,’ Crumble mumbled to his long-suffering clerk, Geoffrey Apple.

Geoffrey was a mirror image of what his boss had been, but Geoffrey’s thinness hid a steely determination for fairness. His shyness and apparent stupidity were a shield against ignorance and bullying. He had never wanted to rise through the layers, having been distinctly unimpressed by their smell – Geoffrey could detect oxen deposits from a long way off. His quiet manner meant that Crumble had no idea how much he relied on Apple, but Apple knew exactly how much. In truth, Apple &

Crumble made a good team, but in this pie the Apple was biding its time.

‘How is it interesting, sir?’ asked Geoffrey in a way that invited a disdainful explanation one might give to a child in explaining why a ball was round.

Crumble prodded the map with a fat finger. ‘This old library in the village here. Hardly visited, hardly used, draining money, ripe for development.’

‘Development, sir?’

‘Prime site for city folks to come and live.’

‘But that will mean the village losing its library.’

‘Of course, you buffoon, you have to make way for progress.’ Crumble’s method of making way for progress was to bulldoze through any opposition, preferably using real bulldozers.

‘Progress with profit?’ suggested Geoffrey.

‘Are you just dense or have you learnt nothing?’ Crumble’s face was getting shinier and redder. ‘Without profit there’s no interest and without interest there’s no profit.’

Geoffrey had noticed that Crumble rolled the ‘pr’ of profit in a way that made it sound like a delicate and rich

chocolate desert. ‘So, in a way, you’re harvesting the library.’

‘Surprisingly well put, Apple.’

‘But you never planted the seeds.’

‘What are you talking about, Apple?’ He waved a pudgy hand. ‘Go and annoy someone else. On the way, arrange for me to visit the library.’

Geoffrey scuttled away in a manner that implied servitude, but as soon as he was out of Crumble’s sight, he strode purposefully to his desk to pick up his coat, hat and umbrella. Geoffrey was going to visit a library. He liked libraries. They were refuges of knowledge, warmth and peace. They could be a little too reverential and he delighted in coughing or crinkling a sweet wrapper, daring other readers to join in. In truth, he had daydreams of dancing from desk to desk to the tune of Bohemian Rhapsody, leaping from Biography to Fiction in a single bound. Instead he would visit his sister Julie and take her for a spin around the living room carpet to whatever tune was playing on the radio. Julie’s breathless giggles were the cue for Geoffrey’s young niece and nephew to give their opinions. Six-year-old Becky would always score them ‘Seven!’, while three-year-old

Thomas would just say ‘You’re silly’ with a beaming smile. However, today and, despite the rain, he was on a bus to a village.

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Toby knocked but there was no answer and no light could be seen. He then noticed that someone had added a scrap of paper below the notice with an arrow and the word ‘back’. He had no idea there was a back to the Library, although the presence of a front made a back a likely accompaniment. He went around the corner to a weed-lined path. This led to a door that had so many layers of paint that any flakes were a testimony to a remarkable variety of dark green shades. A faint light was visible through the rippled glass. Toby was about to knock when a shadow appeared behind the glass and the door opened to reveal Mary. Even when she was snoozing, Mary was always prim and proper, with an immaculate obligatory knot in her hair. She could look upright slumped over her desk. But today her hair was loose with strands escaping at different angles. She held a box tightly in bright yellow washing-up-gloved hands.

Mary's voice sighed with resignation, 'Thank you for coming. I've started to pack the books.'

'It must be a mistake; this can't be right.' Toby was struggling with the news. The thrill that teenagers feel with new experiences only worked if other parts of their lives were rigidly unchanged. Even the most experimental artist used boring everyday materials, although cutting animals in half and preserving them in formalin seemed to be stretching the point. The Library had become an important and stable part of Toby's life and he enjoyed his visits on the way back from school. He learnt more each evening than he did in a day at school, and the fact that the books helped with his homework was a bonus. His parents were impressed by his scholarly application. The possibility of losing all this was very unsettling.

The room was eerily quiet, but Toby could hear muffled sobs coming from the boxes. He could see the cardboard sides of some boxes shaking slightly. Fear and distress hung in the air like bonfire smoke on an autumn's evening. It was the creeping heaviness of the change that made it so ominous.

Toby was distraught. 'This can't be happening. They have no right!'

A book poked a spine over the edge of one of the boxes. Toby saw it was his sleuthing companion, Tabitha Crispy.

‘Tabitha! What are you going to do, where are you going? Where am I going to go in the evenings? What about my homework?’ Toby slumped down into the wicker chair which comforted him by sinking warmly around him, the armrest gently patting his hand.

‘Mary is taking us to the archives in the Central library. We can hide in some obscure categories. Perhaps Mary will be able to arrange a visit for you on occasions.’ Tabitha’s pages hunched over in dejection and she shook with cold trepidation.

Mary picked up Tabitha who settled into Mary’s warm arms.

‘But what will happen to your words? And what about the Library?’

A frown appeared in the corner of the room, followed by an angled nose, a manicured moustache, a down-set mouth framed by high cheekbones and a cleft chin. Toby had never seen the Library’s face; it usually preferred to present a quizzical eyebrow, an unsettling staring eye, an assertive nose, or a departing chin. Its manner was often

superior, sceptical, cynical, and critical but this time was different.

**‘I confess to being uncertain. I came with the stones, but I do not know what will happen if the stones are separated. I cannot be certain if the words will continue to accumulate. It is very worrying.’**

Toby had never heard the Library speak so many words, let alone admit it was worried. Until now it had not occurred to him that the Library might be destroyed. It was hard enough hearing the books crying, but to lose the Library was frightening. Despite its haughty attitude, snide remarks and fondness for corners, Toby found the Library a comforting presence. Its annoying habit of adding and subtracting corners had become a game which Toby sometimes won, probably because the Library let him win. Its sense of humour was not limited to creating new corners and corridors to confuse visitors. It liked to play tricks. Several times Toby had opened familiar doors to find a brick wall. This would be accompanied by a snigger disappearing up the corridor or an eye in one corner that looked at him and winked. Even when the Library stared at you from a dark corner, it felt oddly reassuring.

‘We have to do something....’ Toby was interrupted by a shadow and knock on the front door.

Strangers were usually met by Mary at the front desk. She was a good judge of character and knew whether they were going to browse briefly among the ordinary books or were simply in need of warmth and a chat. Some were allowed to meet the talking books and, of those that ventured through the Library’s fluid corners, most refused to believe their eyes and ears and left with a determination to get a stiff drink and a long rest. A few like Toby stayed and were entranced.

Still holding Tabitha in her arms, Mary looked up at the Library. ‘Can we return to the front desk?’

**‘Of course.’**

Mary held out a hand. ‘Toby, follow me,’ and she pulled Toby to the back door.

‘I thought we were going to the front desk?’

‘Wait.’

Toby watched the back-door slide away from the two of them and become the solid front door. The walls widened until there was space for the desk and the shelves of ordinary books. Toby looked behind him and

saw the usual bookshelves he had seen on his first visit. Mary tidied her hair, hid the yellow washing-up gloves in her desk and went to answer the door.

Geoffrey Apple shook his umbrella, removed his hat, and extended a hand to Mary, and stared.

‘And you are?’ asked Mary, staring back.

‘S-sorry. Hallo, I’m Geoffrey.’ Mary smiled and took his hand.

‘I am Cllr Crumble’s clerk.’ Mary frowned and jerked back her hand. She could feel Tabitha squirming but held her firmly. She turned her back on Geoffrey and placed Tabitha on the desk, putting a finger to her mouth in a silent ‘Hush’.

To Mary’s back, Geoffrey tried to explain, ‘P-please, I am not here because of the library closure. No, sorry, I mean, I am here because of the closure ... but not because I am part of it, the closure I mean. Oh dear, I am not explaining myself. Sorry.’

‘You are sorry for yourself, aren’t you? It matches your wet coat and shoes,’ observed Mary still with her back to Geoffrey. She pointed to Toby. ‘This is Toby, a library member. I’m Mary, the librarian.’

‘Good, it was you I wanted to see.’

Toby’s anger spilled over. ‘Have you come to gloat, enjoy your victory over the death of another library, rub salt into our wounds? You should be ashamed of yourself.’

Mary usually helped Toby redirect his anger so he could see its true source. This time she let it be, but then was surprised at Geoffrey’s reply.

‘Yes, ashamed. Ashamed of the decision and that I work for such an odious man.’

Mary turned to face Geoffrey and, in her best, ‘Quiet!’ librarian voice asked, ‘Then why are you here?’

‘I want to try to stop this, to keep the library open.’

This was not what they had expected. Mary’s frown softened. ‘Then you have a way of stopping this?’

Out of the corner of his eye Toby could see another eye appearing near the ceiling.

‘I-I hadn’t really thought that far ahead, sorry.’

The eye closed slowly and disappeared.

Mary knew how the eye felt. ‘I had thought you might be able to help.’

From the desk behind Mary, Tabitha poked a page corner over the desktop and whispered to Mary's back, 'Don't know what made you think Crumble's browbeaten clerk was going to help.'

Geoffrey straightened up and seemed more solid in the gloom. He looked at Mary and explained, 'I am not browbeaten. My brow has never succumbed to Crumble or his machinations. My bumbling demeanour suits Crumble and protects my job, but he does *not* have my soul.'

'At least he has a soul,' chipped in Tabitha.

Geoffrey looked behind Mary. 'Who said that?'

'You did,' lied Mary, waving her hand at Tabitha. 'Is there any way you can help?'

Geoffrey's frown was as much over the source of the voice behind Mary as to his reply. 'There might be a way. I was thinking that we could....'

A loud knocking on the front door interrupted Geoffrey, accompanied by Crumble's familiar rant, 'Let me in, you buffoons. I demand to see this dilapidated ruin!'

Mary ‘shooshed’ everyone, determined to leave him out in the wet and cold, but the Library had other ideas. The front door swung open with an ominous creak that would have honoured the best horror film. Toby and Mary had always known the door to be well oiled and silent. The Library was up to something.

‘Good! You’re packing. I expect you all out by Saturday,’ said Crumble, as Geoffrey stepped out of the shadows. ‘Apple! What are you doing here?’

Crumble was surprised that Apple seemed taller and more substantial than this morning. He was even more surprised by his reply.

‘I intend to stop you closing and demolishing this library.’

Crumble’s face glistened with anger. ‘Don’t act the fool, Apple. The decision is made. Anyone who gets in my way will regret they were ever born, and that includes you, Apple.’

Crumble strode over to the desk and picked up Tabitha. ‘I am going to make sure that you and this dingy derelict warehouse of useless books disappears forever.’

Mary, Toby and Geoffrey’s memories of the next few seconds were a series of detailed images that rushed by

like a Victorian zoetrope. Mary saw Tabitha open in Crumble's hands but was too late to stop her snapping down on Crumble's fingers with a crunch that hurt as much to hear as to feel. Crumble threw Tabitha on the desk in shock. He spotted an old fire axe on the wall and reached for the handle. Crumble raised the axe to strike Tabitha. But before he could act, the Library *folded*.

Its silence was more menacing than the way the corner wrapped around Crumble, gripping his arm and forcing him to release the axe. In seconds, his body had disappeared, leaving his red nose and a bulging eye filled with horror. His shout was cut short, as he sank further into the cavity. After a few moments, the wall unfolded and returned to a normal empty cranny, complete with cobwebs and several surprised spiders.

'What have you done with him?' shouted Geoffrey.

A smug smile appeared in the corner. **'Do not worry, he is safe. I have simply shown him the back door. Shame he tripped over the doorstep; I've been meaning to fix that for a while....'**

Geoffrey stood with his mouth open, but Mary and Toby just laughed.

Outside, Crumble's nose was squashed against the pavement, his nostrils expanding and contracting as he struggled to catch his breath. He lifted his head, leaving a splatter of blood to blur into the rain. He was confused, but as he got up he became angry. He staggered back to his office, each step stiffening with determined revenge.