

THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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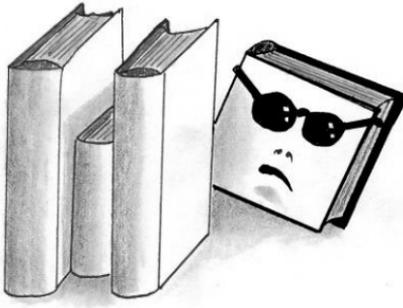
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This Book

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>





5: THE BOOKS THAT HIDE

Geoffrey was not sure whether to keep his mouth open in silence, open it to speak, or run. His indecision was interrupted by Toby who whispered, ‘Well done!’ to Tabitha on the desk.

‘Thank you,’ said a stunned Geoffrey, unsure why he was not running.

Tabitha curled a page into a smile as Mary gently picked her up.

Mary pointed in the direction of the talking books. ‘Toby, I think Geoffrey could do with a sit down, a cup of tea and an explanation.’

The journey was surprisingly free of corners. Either the Library was having a day off or it had warmed to Geoffrey. The newcomer sank gratefully into the wicker chair which had wisely decided that patting his hand might be a bit much for him. Toby went behind the shelves to make tea. He was faced with two books fighting and flapping their pages at each other in clouds of flour, scattering an asteroid shower of raisins on a sunny butter surface that glistened with spilt sugar and cream. The completed scones sat amid the mess, lonely outcrops on a storm-lashed sea.

‘The cream always goes on top of the jam!’

‘Rubbish! The jam goes on top of the cream.’

‘And you didn’t get proper Cornish cream, did you?’

‘Better than the cheap supermarket gloop you got last time.’

‘Amateur!’

‘Dilettante!’

Cordon ‘Blue’ Fancy and Gamey Pullover were rival chefs. They had accumulated their recipes from a multitude of celebrity chef cookery books, but it did not

take long for everyone in the Library to realise that their words had arrived with egos attached and intact. Cordon and Gamey's tempers had not been helped by being misclassified in Fashion, and their race to the Cookery section had been accompanied by tantrums, clattering pans, burnt fingers and flying polenta chips. They were both always on the boil, but this hid a mutual respect. In truth, they were a match made in oven.

‘Stop it!’ whispered Toby. ‘We’ve got a visitor.’

Cordon and Gamey peeked around the shelf, leaving a trail of flour and raisins. Geoffrey was too busy looking at his feet to notice, still trying to make sense of what he had seen.

Cordon looked shamefaced. ‘How were we supposed to know? We were busy getting a farewell tea together. It’s been a trying time.’

‘I understand. But if you look after this visitor, he may be able to help us stop the Library being closed,’ explained Toby.

‘Ah!’ Gamey looked questioningly at Cordon. ‘Can we help?’ Cordon nodded.

‘Cups of tea would be good. With scones. Half with the cream on top, half with jam on top. OK?’

The chefs both nodded and turned to clear up and get started.

Toby pulled up a stool in front of Geoffrey. ‘I need to explain something.’

‘What, that I’m hallucinating and going mad?’

‘You’re not seeing things,’ reassured Toby.

‘I saw Crumble being swallowed by a wall!’ This was a statement that would usually make it clear the speaker was having difficulties.

‘I saw that too. It’s fairly normal around here.’

‘But what happened to Crumble? Is he dead? Is this place dangerous?’ Geoffrey’s eyes had widened in panic.

‘No, no,’ replied Toby calmly. ‘If the Library says he’s safe, then he’s safe.’

‘I thought *that* voice was in my head!’

‘No, it was real too. This is a strange but wonderful Library. Perhaps Mary could explain?’

Toby stood up as Mary came in carrying a book. Mary looked at Geoffrey and said softly, ‘What

you've seen and heard is just part of the wonder. Are you ready to learn more?'

The gentleness of her voice made Geoffrey look up and whisper 'Yes.'

Mary handed Geoffrey the book. 'This is Tabitha. She has something to tell you.'

Geoffrey stood up and reached out with trembling hands. During this strangeness, for some reason, he felt trusted. He placed the book on the stool in front of him, unsure what to do. He started to reach out when the book slowly opened and sat up. Geoffrey fell back into the chair, but instead of panic, he smiled with curiosity.

'Hello Geoffrey, I'm Tabitha.'

Geoffrey's surprise was that he wasn't surprised, though his jaw disagreed by dropping.

'You can close your mouth now.'

Geoffrey closed his mouth and grinned. 'I suppose I was expecting a deep philosophical gem of wisdom that would give immediate meaning to my life.'

Tabitha's pages shook with giggles. 'Sorry to disappoint you. I had assumed you'd had enough life-changing experiences for today. But if you want more....'

‘No!’ Geoffrey held up his hand. ‘Thank you for the kind offer but after a very strange day, meeting you takes the biscuit.’

Cordon and Gamey knew a cue when they heard one.

‘Biscuits! Name your preference.’

‘We can make arrowroot, amaretti, biscotti, bannock, bourbon....’

‘Brandy snap, caramel, chocolate, crackers, crispbread....’

‘Digestive, flapjack, florentine, garbaldi, ginger....’

‘Macaroon, oatcake, petit fours, pretzel, rich tea, shortbread....’

‘Umm... wafer.’

‘And umm... water biscuit.’

Mary interrupted, ‘Thank you, boys, that’s wonderful. But did I hear you have just made some scones. They would be perfect.’

Cordon and Gamey disappeared, still arguing.

‘You forgot rusks.’

‘And you forgot drop biscuits.’

Geoffrey was fascinated by the cookery tutorial and looked at Tabitha. ‘So, you aren’t the only book who can talk!’

He was answered by a chorus of voices from the boxes and the shelves echoed with hellos and words of welcome.

‘What do you think?’ asked Mary.

Geoffrey stood up. ‘This is wonderful! Marvellous!’ Then he remembered and clenched his fists. ‘We have to stop Crumble.’

Toby looked at Mary and then the ceiling. ‘We’re going to need some help.’

An eye appeared in one corner.

‘I am happy to help. I hope you approved of my showing Cllr Crumble the door, although I doubt that my approach will have helped his mood.’

Geoffrey had to sit down again. This was only the second time in his life that a library ceiling had spoken to him. Twice in a day was a bit much, but he managed to agree. ‘I suspect it will have made him seethingly irritated. He’ll be plotting his revenge.’

Mary put on her most organised demeanour. ‘Right, let’s start planning, but first some tea and scones.’

At the council offices Crumble was on the phone.

‘I want you down there first thing tomorrow morning. Bring in whatever and whoever you need. I want it done by the evening. Yes, I know it’s a Saturday. No, whatever it costs. Yes, you have free rein. Alright, cash up front. Yes, you’ll get it this evening.’

On the other end of the phone Jeff was rubbing his chin with cement-stained puzzlement. He had worked for Crumble before, but there was always some problem such as people still living in houses earmarked for demolition. He had distrusted Crumble from the start and saw him as a greasy blob on the make. Jeff was no lightweight himself, but he knew that his pounds were honestly accumulated. Crumble seemed too keen to see good buildings disappear, usually for profitable and expensive housing. Despite being an accountant, Crumble had no concept of affordable housing. Jeff had given his excuses in recent years, but jobs were going to be scarce this coming winter and this job was being paid

up front, although his suspicions were not allayed by being handed cash in a deserted car park.

In the Library, more had joined the group and the tea and scones had gone down well, much to the satisfaction of the chefs. Tabitha had explained how their rejected words accumulated in this library and why their names and titles varied from the originals. Geoffrey was much more diplomatic than Toby at hiding his amusement at Carl Chicken's *A Twist of Olive* but could not resist asking Carl if he would like a dry martini. Tabitha curled over her pages and shook with silent giggles, but Toby and Mary had to go behind the shelves to hide their laughter with coughs and sneezes. Fortunately, Carl predated Martinis and seemed to take no notice. Geoffrey was impressed by Sir Donald Coil. He was tempted to ask if his *Gairloch Homes* contained any advice on house prices, but it was difficult to make a joke at the expense of someone who looked at you with such a fierce, forensic glare. He saw through the Bronty sisters' lace and charm and suspected that if he reached out to them without permission, he would lose his fingers, probably one at a time. Geoffrey was intrigued by the

suggestions from Ilack Azimuth and Luckless Atoms, suspecting that most of their ideas would not be invented for centuries, if ever.

Theo Toaster was a bundle of enthusiasm that tended to suggest deviously lethal traps to catch any intruders. The others persuaded him that simpler measures would be adequate without any need for death or destruction, so he settled into planning mode with a series of grunts and humphs. Jarr Talkin kept poking his pipe up in the air and saying that what they needed was a wizard. Everyone else assumed he was in one of his adventures in muddled soil or whatever it was called, until they realised his pipe was pointing up at the corner of the room where a face waited patiently.

‘My apologies,’ said Mary, ‘we have not asked for your thoughts.’

‘Thank you. Perhaps we could consider the worst scenario and prepare for that.’

Toby spread out his arms. ‘How do you prepare for bulldozers and men with pickaxes?’

Geoffrey had the answer to that. ‘Actually, it’s simple. We make it clear the building is still occupied.’

‘And if that doesn’t work?’

‘Then we will need to be imaginative.’

‘Toby, it’s getting late and your parents will be wondering where you are. We can make the final preparations tonight,’ said Mary and seeing Toby’s concern added, ‘We will be fine. Come back in the morning.’

Toby looked towards the chefs. ‘At least you’ll have plenty of biscuits.’ On cue, came the clattering of baking tins going into the oven.

The next morning, Toby got up early, had some toast and told his parents he was going to the library. His father looked over his paper and said casually, ‘Don’t bother. When I went to get the paper, they were putting up boarding and getting a bulldozer off a lorry. Shame, it’s the only library around for miles.’

Toby dropped his toast and ran out, grabbing his coat and gloves. As he turned the corner, he saw his father was right. Grey boarding now covered the fencing around the library, except for an opening into which a large yellow bulldozer was churning its rattling, fume-laden way towards the building.

‘Stop!’ shouted Toby, running towards the front door.

A large cement-lined hand halted Toby in his tracks. ‘And where do you think you’re going, sonny boy?’

Toby looked up at a round face topped by a bright yellow hard hat, matched with an extra-large yellow fluorescent high-visibility jacket. Jeff looked like a sumo wrestler who was moonlighting as a school crossing patrol officer. His face was trying to be stern but the laugh lines around his eyes told a different story.

‘I’m going to the library to do some homework,’ explained Toby.

‘Not today, or any other day for that matter. We’re here to take it down.’

‘You can’t, there are people in there!’

In Jeff’s early dealings with Crumble he had ignored such claims as attempts to delay the inevitable, until he spotted an elderly face at an upper window just as he was about to demolish a house. He had stopped dealing with Crumble soon after. Was history repeating itself?

Jeff thought it wise to check. ‘How do you know?’

‘Because they told me last night that they would be staying put.’

Jeff sighed. 'OK, let's see, shall we? But if you're wrong....'

'I'm not,' said Toby with confidence.

Jeff banged on the door. 'Is there anyone in there?'

'Yes!' came the reply.

Jeff was beginning to regret ever agreeing to this job, but not to having been paid up front. 'Who's there?'

'I'm Mary, the librarian.'

'And I'm Geoffrey Apple, Cllr Crumble's clerk. We're not moving from here.' This was followed by shouts of 'Quite right!', 'Absolutely not, you cad!', 'Nikogda!', 'We have lasers!' and 'There'll be no biscuits for you, ever.'

Jeff stood back from the door. 'How many are in there?'

Mary replied, 'Two of us at the door but lots behind us.'

Geoffrey shouted, 'Dozens more.'

'I knew it!' exclaimed Jeff and got on his phone to Crumble. 'Yep, the librarian and your clerk. No, the doors are locked and solid. No, I will not use the

bulldozer.’ He held the phone from his ear while Crumble shouted and swore. Once there was a silent gap Jeff interrupted, ‘You do know there are dozens in there on a protest? This is not going to look good in the papers. In fact, here is the lady from the *Echo* now. Sorry, have to do a media interview.’

Amelia knew Jeff as a solid and honest citizen. ‘Hello Jeff. Can’t believe they’re closing another library. I like this old building. Who approved this demolition?’

‘Guess who?’ said Jeff.

‘Crumble,’ they both said together.

‘What’s stopped you?’

Jeff explained, ‘People have locked themselves in there protesting at the closure. Sounds like lots of people. Dozens they claim.’

Amelia brightened up. ‘Ooo, good. Can I go and speak to them?’

‘Of course, I’m not doing anything while people are in there.’

Amelia went up to the door and knocked quietly. ‘I’m Amelia Brentworth from the *Echo*. Could I come in? I’d like to do a piece on your situation.’

There was much whispering from behind the door. Jeff was right, it sounded like lots of whispers.

Mary replied through the door, ‘What do you think of libraries, Amelia?’

‘I used to come to this library all the time as a child. Had a nice warm feel about it. Now I have to go to the central library with all its IT links, but it’s not the same.’

‘Toby, are you out there?’ asked Mary.

‘Yes. I think she could help. Jeff is a good bloke; he won’t do anything while you’re all in there.’

The locks were turned, and the doors opened smoothly, without a sound. It took a while for Amelia to adjust her eyes, but the cosy feel took her straight back to a shy 10-year-old, excited at finding her next instalment. She used to wander the cathedral aisles lined with knowledge, excitement and anticipation. She had found the wicker chair many times and would sit reading her latest borrowed book, safe in its creaking comfort. Surrounded by words, she would have conversations. At home she did this in front of the mirror, hands on hips using her mum’s facial expressions, shoes and lipstick. Those were one-sided but her conversations in the library were two-, three- or four-sided and felt exciting, a secret

adventure she shared with no-one. As the years went by Amelia had found it harder to remember the details of those discussions, but their memory had influenced her life in ways she could not imagine.

The doors closed and Mary, Geoffrey and Toby introduced themselves.

Amelia was puzzled. 'I thought there was a crowd in here.'

'In a way there is,' said Mary. Toby and Geoffrey shook their heads, but Mary ignored them and continued. 'Would you like to sit in the wicker chair again?'

'Is it still here? Yes!' said Amelia, feeling the excited trepidation of a 10-year-old.

'There are some old friends there who would like to say hello,' said Mary.

Amelia responded with an odd, puzzled look, but she knew where to go, and the Library obliged. She stopped behind the wicker chair and stroked its back, her fingers trembling slightly. Hesitantly she sat down, the chair trying to make her feel at ease with soothing creaks. A familiar voice spoke to her.

‘Hello Amelia, it’s good to see you again,’ said Merrily Bronty.

Amelia sat bolt upright and ran out of the room.

Mary was surprised to see Merrily returning on her own. ‘Where’s Amelia?’

‘I do not know. She became very frightened when I spoke to her and ran out.’

‘What frightened her?’ asked Mary.

‘I think I know, but I need to speak to her now, alone. Library, do you know where she is?’

‘She is in the empty section next to the old wooden shelves.’

Merrily found Amelia on the floor holding a candle whose reflection danced on her tears.

‘Stay away!’ whispered Amelia in a voice strangled with anxiety. ‘I thought coming back here would help, but it’s worse.’

‘Why is it worse? You used to enjoy our conversations.’ Merrily reached out a page.

Amelia shrank away from the offered page, clutching her candle. ‘I was TEN! You’re allowed to have

imaginary conversations, its expected, part of growing up. But as I got older, I realised the voices were in my head. I'd managed to lock that fear away, but now I'm here and the voices are back. It means I'm sick and my daughter will probably end up like me. But the voices are only here. That's why Crumble has to get rid of this place.'

'Amelia, no! You don't understand, our talks were real, cherished.'

'They won't be any more.' With a shaking hand she held her candle to some scrap of paper on the desiccated wooden shelf which caught fire with a sudden 'whomp'.

'Now I can get some peace.'