

THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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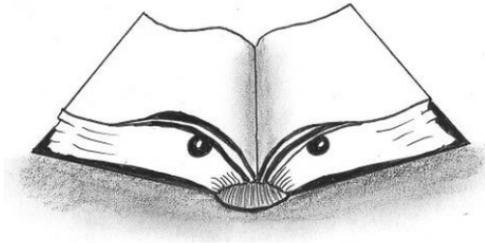
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This Book

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>





7: THE BOOK INSIDE

Betty Blanchett was in little doubt that in the war against time the years were winning. Ninety-eight years had a habit of ambushing you in imaginative ways. What had started as an occasional grunt on getting out of a chair had become a sofa-esque pirouette to the vertical, accompanied by musical wind whose embarrassment had lessened as the deafness had worsened. Like the weekend's best goal, the sofa adventure was in slow motion and replayed several times until the standing position was reached. Protocol then demanded striking

out across the floor while negotiating coffee tables and rugs that were scheming to bump your shins or trip you up. Normal life now required walking aids that were too bulky to be convenient and hearing aids that were too small to be useful. The basic requirement for famous heroes is often a solo crossing of inhospitable terrain or sea, preferably while losing parts of your anatomy. Few acknowledged that getting across the living room floor could be heroic for some. And yet, this was a woman who thought *The Full Monty* was boring because the last scene was filmed from behind – Betty’s mind was having no difficulty keeping well ahead of her body.

Betty went through to open for business. She unlocked the door, turned the ageing sign to ‘open’ and looked back into the memories of her bookshop. She had arrived from France on VJ day to join her husband. He had been in the Free French Army and had joined the British Army as the war ended. She had started in the bookshop to help an elderly owner who could no longer move books and see customers. She rapidly learnt English and helped him stock up with French books to serve the growing French community. When the owner died, she had been stunned to find he had left her the bookshop in his will. The bookshop soon became a hub

for Anglo-French relations, filled with *Gitanes* smoke, the smell of *Pastis* and the sound of Edith Piaf. Now it was a quiet second-hand bookshop filled with dust, the smell of warm toast and the sound of BBC News.

Amelia had been returning from the library with her daughter Callie when she saw Betty opening the bookshop. Callie pulled her towards the faded door.

‘Look, Mummy, another library! Let’s go in!’

Amelia explained, ‘It’s a bookshop, where you buy books to keep, instead of borrowing them and returning them to the library.’

Callie was imagining buying a permanent talking friend to gossip with at home. ‘I want to keep some books.’ She was through the door before Amelia could stop her. The bell above the door tinkled a welcome, making Callie giggle.

Betty turned around at the sounds. ‘Welcome, young lady. And you too, madame.’ This was said with a French accent that had hardly lessened since VJ day.

‘My daughter wanted to see your shop; she thought it was a library.’

‘Well, in a way, that is what it has become. Few people come in here to buy books these days and I cannot resist refusing those who want to borrow a book.’

‘I told you it was a library,’ admonished Callie in her usual hands-on-hip stance when she was being stern. ‘Where are the talking books?’

Betty frowned with a polite smile and looked at Amelia. ‘And what do you know about talking books, my dear?’

‘Oh, she means the ones that make noises that match the pictures,’ said Amelia, trying to pull Callie back to the door.

Callie was having none of it. ‘Not those books, they’re for babies! I mean the ones we talk to at the other library.’

Amelia was trying to think how to explain a child’s overactive imagination when Betty interrupted her thoughts.

‘Ah! Do you know Mary the *bibliothécaire*?’ Amelia nodded. Betty continued, ‘She lets me borrow some special books sometimes ... if they want a trip out of the library.’ She gave Amelia a knowing smile.

‘We don’t want to put you to any trouble.’

‘*Pas du tout*. No problem. I have a few in the back if you would like to follow me.’

Betty took them into her lounge at the back of the shop, switched off the radio and went to the small kitchen. ‘Would you like some tea and scones?’

‘Did Cordon and Gamey make them?’ asked Callie.

‘I hope you don’t mind, but I made these. Are those two still arguing whether the cream or the jam goes on top?’ said Betty.

Amelia was reassured that Betty knew the Library’s inhabitants. ‘They’re still at it, but it doesn’t seem to slow up the number of cakes they make. They are really the best of *patisserie* friends.’

Callie shrugged, trying to see where she kept her special books.

Betty laughed at the shared friendship and went to a shelf in the corner where four books were sitting politely. She held out her hand to Callie. ‘Would you like to meet my friends?’ Callie nodded excitedly. Four pairs of eyes swivelled in her direction. Betty pulled up a Callie-sized wicker chair and a small table for the four books. In

moments Callie and the books were chatting like best friends.

‘Who are they?’ asked Amelia quietly.

‘Meet Ronald Dull of *Charlie and the Sprocket Factory*. You and Callie will know Dahl’s wonderful books. Ronald’s book is more about gears and pulleys than confectionary, which explains why he’s filed under Manufacturing, but he remains a wonderful storyteller.’ Ronald waved a cheery page.

‘The one on the left is Peas Louis’ *The Lie-in, the Stitch and the Bathrobe*. His book has echoes of the Narnia stories but with less religion and more fashion, although Peas has a secret preference for dressing in duvets on a cold day. And he’s a firm believer in roughage.’ Betty and Amelia had broad grins as Peas shook a well-manicured page at them.

‘As for Gnarl,’ Betty continued, ‘you’ll know his brother author, Carl Chickens. Gnarl Thickens has not really improved on the name and his *A Trail of Committees* was not helped by being filed under Management.’ Gnarl threw a crumpled agenda at them accompanied by a grin.

‘What about the last one in fatigues and safety boots?’

‘Ah! That is Miss Nomer. Her book *The Myriad* is a bit of a mystery, as was the ancient Greek author, Homer. She decided the way was open for some strong characterisation as a vegan urban poet.’

Miss Nomer stuck out a boot and a thumbs-up in welcome.

‘Wasn’t Homer a man?’ whispered Amelia.

‘That’s not the sort of detail that would bother Miss Nomer,’ explained Betty.

Amelia and Betty eavesdropped on the conversation. Callie was in full flow.

‘The Library nearly burnt down, and my mummy was caught in the fire, but she was saved by the books, especially Uncle Theo. He’s funny.’

Ronald had never thought of Theo as funny but was proud that his friend had been the hero. He looked at Amelia. ‘So, what happened?’

Amelia decided that it might not help to admit that she was an arsonist but made a resolution to explain the truth to Callie when she was older. ‘I’ll let Callie tell the story.’

Callie rushed on, ‘And then the clever Library did some tricks to make it look like it was crashing down. Boom!’ Callie emphasised the drama with outstretched hands and crunching sounds. ‘The fat man from the council went away, he thought he’d won. But he was wrong! Mummy and Geoffrey made sure of that by getting him arrested.’ She clapped her hands shut like the closing door of a jail.

‘Who’s Geoffrey?’ asked Gnarl.

‘Sorry,’ explained Betty, ‘I’ve been too busy to take the books back. It seems as if we’ve missed out on the drama, fun and gossip.’ Amelia realised the four books had been in the bookshop for a while but was not convinced by Betty’s excuse that she was busy. Her shop looked as if it had not seen business for a long while. Her thoughts were interrupted by Callie putting her hand up and jumping up and down.

‘I know who he is, I do. I know. Shall I tell them?’ Callie looked as if she would burst with the knowledge. She had recently discovered gossip was a gold-plated bargaining chip, especially if it embarrassed her mother. She had also begun to realise that gossip could hurt, but that being given permission to reveal secrets was delicious.

‘Alright Callie, would you like to tell us?’ said Amelia, her grin matching the others in the room.

Callie was still fidgeting with excitement. ‘Well, Geoffrey Apple was Cllr Crumble’s clerk....’

‘Apple and Crumble, a delicious combination,’ noted Miss Nomer.

‘Except that Geoffrey hates Crumble and loves the Library,’ explained Callie.

Peas piped up, ‘Never would have happened if I had been there to advise on their diet.’

‘The world’s problems are not all solved by roughage, Peas,’ retorted Miss Nomer.

Ronald pondered for a moment. ‘But if Archimedes could think of a lever long enough to move the world, perhaps enough roughage could clear the largest pile of’

‘Thank you, Ronald,’ interrupted Betty, ‘we shall leave you with that thought and I have no doubt it will appear in one of your future stories.’

‘Mmm. I may call it *Peas and the World’s Biggest Stool*,’ suggested Ronald.

‘Not funny,’ said Peas.

‘Perhaps we should evacuate the room now,’ added Amelia with a profoundly serious expression.

‘You’re not helping,’ grunted Peas.

Amelia and Callie dropped into the bookshop whenever they could. Callie loved listening to Ronald’s stories, including his latest, which Callie explained to Amelia was about eating your greens on a huge chair. Peas and Miss Nomer would have long arguments over suitable fashion, although Callie could not understand why Miss Nomer was so against something called Loo Button shoes. Most surprising was Gnarl, whose gruff demeanour hid an infinite patience in listening to Callie, no matter what her stories, grumbles or flights of fancy. Amelia admired his calm listening and wished she had the same gift. Betty’s reluctance to take the books back to the Library was becoming understandable. Betty had read all the books in her shop, many several times. Company was infrequent and these four books were wonderful companions. Despite this, Amelia wondered if the books might want to return to the Library and intended to ask them at the next visit.

That next visit was delayed by Amelia's work and some birthday parties for Callie's friends. Callie had never enjoyed parties. They just seemed noisy events of overdressed, extrovert children, unpleasant food and parents, followed by fullness and nausea. Amelia often stayed during the parties in case Callie needed reassurance or rescue. After one party with entertainers that insisted everyone join in, Callie needed rescuing and wanted to go to the bookshop. They arrived late afternoon and found the door locked. Callie knocked on the glass, rattling the bell inside. After a while, a pale-looking Betty saw Callie and came to unlock the door.

'Hello Callie, Amelia. Today is not a good day, perhaps you could come back tomorrow,' implored Betty, evidently exhausted.

'I need to come in!' pleaded Callie. From an early age Callie had used 'need' when she wanted something badly and Amelia has lost count how many times she had told her 'Just because you *want* something doesn't mean you *need* it.'

Amelia put her hand on Betty's arm. 'Tell me what's wrong. Perhaps we can help?'

Betty slowly opened the door but locked it behind them. The bookshop looked unchanged except that, unusually, the four books were on the desk, each looking in different directions. Callie was unusually quiet and kept close to Amelia as they followed Betty into the lounge behind the shop. Betty fell into her armchair with a sigh.

‘I have worked in this bookshop for over half a century. Never once have I felt frightened, until last night. I was going to bed and I had forgotten my teacup in the shop. It felt different, strange. Then I heard pages turning.’

‘Why is that unusual? It is a bookshop,’ said Amelia.

‘Books have to be open to hear pages turning. The books here are closed and on shelves. And it was a calm night without a breeze.’

‘Are you saying someone was in here reading?’

‘No,’ Betty continued. ‘The shop was empty.’

‘What about the talking books?’ asked Amelia.

‘They never make a sound unless they want to. Anyway, they were in the lounge, not the shop. No, something else was making the noise.’

It was then they heard a rustling from the shop. Betty and Amelia stood up, Callie clutching her mother's leg, trembling slightly.

They stared into the dark shop. The four books were now all looking at a book in the corner. It was not so much the way the book shuffled its pages that was disturbing but the way its eyes reflected the light from the lounge. Those eyes were staring at Callie. It moved rapidly towards her, scattering the four books. Gnarl recovered first and flew towards Callie in the book's path, wrapping its protective covers around her. The book stopped at the doorway, its eyes flicking between Betty and Amelia. Suddenly a large boot shot out from the side and kicked the book onto the floor. Immediately Ronald and Peas kept it pinned down while Miss Nomer prepared to leap on the book with her safety boots in a very unsafe way. Beneath them the book went suddenly limp and whatever had fired its actions disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

It took a while for Callie to stop hugging Gnarl, but he stayed by her side while they all recovered.

'Thank you all,' said Betty, patting everyone's hands and pages. 'I don't know what that was, but it has definitely gone. The shop feels its familiar dusty self.'

‘We will need to let Mary and the Library know what has happened.’ Betty nodded in agreement. ‘Do you think it will return?’ asked Amelia.

‘Not while we’re here,’ said Miss Nomer.

‘Agreed,’ said Ronald and Peas together.

Tears appeared in the corner of Betty’s eyes. ‘I know I have kept you all here longer than I deserve, and I would have understood if you had wanted to return to the Library. What about you Gnarl?’

Gnarl looked at Callie. ‘It seems like we’re getting all the company and excitement we could want here. As for me, I will leave that decision to Callie.’

Callie looked up at Amelia. ‘Is this a need time, not just a want?’

‘Yes,’ said Amelia, ‘if that’s OK with Gnarl?’

‘Please Gnarl, can you come home with me?’ pleaded Callie with wide, needy eyes.

‘Delighted,’ replied Gnarl. ‘I’ll just check if my diary is free ... yes that’s fine,’ he said with a grin.