



THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

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WILLOW OAK

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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>



10 BOOKS WITH PRIDE

Winter's frosty stings had been surprisingly infrequent and as the first snowdrops pushed into the air, they wondered who had stolen the snow. The bluebell stalks were well established, ready to burst into sky blue at the first sign of warmth, while swollen tree buds prepared to unfurl their green sails. Everything had an air of anticipation, which accompanied Susan as she walked up to the Library. She had been invited by Mary and was nervously looking forward to meeting more books.

Mary opened the door and Susan walked into a party. The Library had opened the entrance to make room for a hall with chandeliers, gothic windows, and well-lit exit signs on both sides of the aisle here, here and here. In the corner two smug faces looked down on their handiwork. The hall was large enough to accommodate everyone, including a large buffet table at which Cordon and Gamey were fulfilling their dreams to satisfy every appetite.

Betty was sitting comfortably in the wicker chair, which was holding her hand. Callie was in Betty's lap, chatting non-stop to Gnarl and a surprisingly attentive Carl. Amelia stood behind Betty with a hand on Betty's shoulder. She still looked shocked at having just been told by Betty that she was now the co-owner of the bookshop, but could not resist thinking of ideas to bring the old bookshop back to life. Theo and Ronald were discussing the best way to release a jammed nut, which Cordon misunderstood so Gamey turned up with a plate of jam-filled doughnuts. The cause of the misunderstanding became clear when Stan appeared with several pages covered in jam and sugar. Hector was trying to get a word in edgeways with Flo who was extolling the virtues of carbolic and she only stopped when the smell of doughnuts drifted past.

Peas had already inspected the buffet to ensure there was enough fibre content. He had then started a discussion with Miss Nomer about what to wear for the party, despite the fact the party had already started. Ilack and Luckless were filling balloons and arguing over the role of primordial helium at the beginning of the universe. Alex Hummus was determined to start early on the punch. Elaine and the Bronty sisters sat on chairs

hiding behind lace fans and eyeing up potential suitors like alligators picking prey at a watering hole.

Tabitha and Sir Donald were trying to out-observe each other. They had already done the architecture, walking gaits and mannerisms, and were now observing facial twitches. The score was even, although their interpretations made little sense. For example, their observation that Miss Nomer and Peas' diametrically opposed fashion views meant they were romantically compatible would have resulted in a flying boot aimed squarely at their heads, had not the two fashionistas been too busy arguing.

Mary asked Geoffrey to introduce Susan to some of the books and walked across to whisper a few words to Theo. His surprise turned to joy as Mary returned carrying a shy Agnetha who had revived but was still gathering her words—thoughts would come later. Mary left the two together. She was about to return to Susan and Geoffrey when the room went quiet. In a corner Smiles and Ann had entered the room. Mary checked if the libraries were still there, but the two faces were looking down impassively.

'Welcome to you both.' She leant down and asked quietly, 'Could I enquire how you would like to be

introduced?’ She stood up and said, ‘Hello everyone, can I introduce Jules and Ann.’

The room relaxed and the conversation continued. Even the libraries smiled.



11 BOOKS MODIFIED

The water mirrored the dark evening and slid past the bridge piers with a faint gurgle. Its stealthy advance to the sea matched the furtive steps of the figure scanning the shadows. A heavy overcoat, hat and scarf hid the face but provided scant insulation from the flurries of late March snow. Black leather gloves gripped a brown packet that crinkled in protest at the pressure being exerted. A thin shape appeared ahead and stopped, head tilted to one side.

The packet-carrier's voice was muffled by the scarf and coat, 'Come far?'

'Well, from Gateshead, like. You got somethin' for me?'

Both grasped the brown packet, only relaxing once each set of eyes had stared in confirmation. The thin shape disappeared, and the overcoat turned back, silhouetted in the Tyne bridge lights rippling on the water.

Arthur Chubbe was a people's politician, at least to the people who were useful to him. He took pride in his charming persona which he used to attract acolytes from all walks of life, most on paths he would never travel. He had been obliged to restrain his jocular 'touchy feely' approach to meeting people, as it tended to have too much touch and feel. His friendships were based on who brought him most benefit at the time, but, despite the sugar coating, it was essentially bullying. This was not something he recognised in himself, mainly because it was an inherent trait and he was blind to its cost. Consequently, relationships ebbed and flowed, but never flowered into anything he could understand. The narrative of the moment was what mattered, regardless of the facts, which he viewed as irritating grit. Any author

of inconvenient facts was smeared in some way, followed by a final flourish of coating it all in a conspiracy theory. Arthur was exceptionally good at conspiracies. He could create connivance in his sleep and deflect conspiracies aimed at him, especially if they were true. The lack of detail did not trouble him in the slightest, in the same way that a shark is not troubled by the colour of the meal ahead. That Spartan approach to the truth had prompted his media label of ‘porky-pie Chubby’, which, in turn, had generated a host of political cartoons, many of whose originals hung on his wall. His favourite was of him in court taking the oath, one hand on a bible, the other stuffing money in his mouth. In Chubbe’s world this was not an insult. It proved he had arrived and was being noticed.

He had been irritated by having to travel north, something he suffered only if there was a useful photo opportunity such as a flood, terrorist attack or a hospital that had been given additional funds to treat patients. To Arthur, Newcastle-upon-Tyne was synonymous with coal mines, shipyards and incomprehensible locals who only seemed to have complaints about southerners. His understanding of the north matched his grasp of poverty and homelessness.

‘Just going up to Newcastle-on-whine,’ he had stated cheerily to his secretary, Emma. She normally arranged his first-class travel, but she was used to Arthur making ‘off-piste’ arrangements for various assignations.

‘Shall I let everyone know that you’re unavailable for a few days and *nights*, sir?’

Arthur scowled at her emphasis on ‘nights’ and stormed off. As he closed the door Emma kept busy with her serious face and, on cue, Arthur opened the door to check she was still seriously at work. Only when she had checked with security that he had left did Emma’s smile appear, delighted at the prospect of a few days without Arthur’s growling company.

Emma Tate was a diligent and patient civil servant, brought in after several younger incumbents had asked to be moved. She had been with Arthur for over a year and had made it clear that she was not to be used or abused. He had treated her politely enough, although she suspected that was because he saw her as a challenge to be overcome. She had no intention of being overcome. Refuge was going home to spend an evening with Winston and telling him what Arthur had been up to. Winston would respond by stretching and purring, while

blinking in time to the red light on her digital voice recorder.

Her regular missives to Winston had begun the year before. Arthur was responsible for awarding a variety of government contracts. They had to go out to tender, but it was not difficult to nudge decisions, if necessary, with a cash-cushioned shove in the right direction. He enjoyed pointing out that there was a profitable bottom line on toilet paper, you could clean up on towels and make a killing on army equipment. Arthur's grasp of humour had never evolved beyond early childhood.

Emma had noticed a pattern. Firstly, many of the less conspicuous contracts went to the same companies. Secondly, these events were usually followed by an expensive holiday or a new car. A recent phone call suggested someone else was coming to the same conclusions as Emma.

Arthur was sure that all the loopholes had been closed. The computer hacker from Gateshead had been paid, even though the data loss was small, and the culprit turned out to be a spotty teenager working from their bedroom. Any further attempts and he would have someone bump into the culprit's mother. Even the inquiry into MPs' finances had been sorted through

friends on the committee who owed him favours. He suspected Emma was keeping tabs on him, so he had been feeding her information on his legitimate contracts. Like an elephant being stalked by a tiger, he was sure he was too wily and too big to be brought down. What he did not see was the animal leg-trap in his path.

Avery Bass had taken no prisoners on her way up to the boardroom chair. Her charm was a weapon she used to scythe her way through competitors. Her first name had proven useful, in that male interview boards had no pre-conceived ideas as she walked in. Once in the door, she could see the whites of their eyes and they were trapped. She had a sharp mind that relished analysing the manoeuvrings around her. She had a specific skill in spotting the sharks, the ones most likely to get in her way. She then fed those sharks, a complimentary idea here, a compliment there. Later she rewarded the sharks with promotions, bonuses or a favourable office move. Those sharks tended to stay friendly. ‘Fed sharks don’t bite,’ she would say with a smile that hid a willingness to bite without warning. If the sharks tried to bite back, they would find themselves painfully grinding their own teeth through frustration. No-one bit twice. It was bullying

with a smile, although she would have been deeply hurt to be told this because it was such an ingrained part of her soul.

Her ability to read others contrasted with the impossibility of reading her. She wore her charisma like a suit of armour. You could have known Avery Bass for decades and still have no idea how she might respond. This had been particularly useful in her business dealings, since it wrong-footed her targets, who could not guess her current views. Running shell companies offshore was a lucrative side-line. Those silent companies allowed her to squirrel away profits and channel funds obtained through methods that tax authorities and law enforcement agencies would have found interesting. Bass did not see this as unprincipled since she was the principal beneficiary. What she could not see was that the sharks had begun to circle.

Lily Milburn was wondering what to do with her newfound wealth. Well, wealth she had found on the Newcastle quayside. Alright, hush money from a corrupt politician.

‘An’ wot’s wrang with that?’ Lily told herself in the mirror. ‘That toff Chubbe was up to nee good. He was reet crooked.’

Lily liked to work on her Geordie dialect. She had moved to Newcastle only a few years earlier and her Chertsey, Thames-side accent had labelled her as a ‘posh girl’. There were enough bullies at school to ensure she suffered. It was always subtle, silent, secretive and successful. Her persecutors knew their art well. She had found solace in computer hacking, starting with getting into the school’s computer server to tweak a few test grades and reports. Her sudden popularity was cut short when she refused to continue. This was partly out of caution but also because she had discovered a member of staff had been embezzling school funds. Exposing the fraud by sending files anonymously to the head teacher gave her an exquisite sense of justice that was lacking in her school friends.

She had seen Arthur Chubbe in a TV interview answering some probing questions on government contracts. He had come across as arrogant and dismissive, and it did not take long to uncover the pattern. Arthur’s use of social media to boast about holidays and large purchases meant it was easy to tie the contracts into

his expenditure. Ironically, most of the information was already available, and she used little of her hacking skills. Naiveté prompted Lily to send the details directly to Chubbe, who responded by offering money in return for keeping quiet. Since her Dad had left, they had always been short, and Lily accepted the offer. A larger hard drive to back up files was useful, and she told her Mum she could manage with less pocket money, while slipping extra cash regularly into her Mum's purse.

In hindsight, Lily realised she could have asked for much more, so she did some more searching. It was while looking into Chubbe's business activities that she came across information on shell companies abroad, many with Avery Bass as director. It took a while to discover that the trail of shell companies led to some very shady characters known to be involved in money laundering. The path was tortuous but clear. This time she sent the details to Avery's auditors. Lily was amused by the irony that bullies were being exposed by a victim of bullying.

ChronCo audited many of the companies that provided government contracts. Their financial and tax audits were crucial if companies were to retain the trust of customers and investors. These companies covered everything from supplying toilet paper to securing

nuclear power plants, a comparison that did not feature in their expensive and polished advertising. Their brochures promoted ‘offshore investment opportunities’ but made no mention this was through shell companies in places where little or no tax was paid. Their glossy brochures preferred to gloss over the truth, so Lily’s exposé was exposed to the shredder. ChronCo was a very shiny chrome tap pouring out dividends for its shareholders and customers. It failed to notice that the lime-scale was building up and the tap’s washer was beginning to leak.

Chubbe and Bass knew how official reports worked. Their content depended on how vulnerable the organisation felt at the time. High levels of threat, like a forthcoming election, meant that a government report was never likely to see the light of day, or was released at an opportune moment such as a major disaster. Commercial reports depended on the current finances of the company; increasing profits resulted in exaggerated promises; plummeting profits generated excuses such as ‘a challenging environment’. Many official reports were like the scratchy, tracing-paper-like toilet paper of old: little stuck to them, the smell was covered by the disinfectant and anything nasty was likely to be spread

around. However, on occasions, caution was a necessity. This had nothing to do with being economical but everything to do with protecting the economics of investors. It was not lying, but simply omitting some facts, being concise, providing clarity and being sufficiently transparent so that no-one could see the stains.

Two official reports were ready for publication. ChronCo's audit on Ms Bass's company was full of promise, despite the 'challenging environment'. The government's Finance and Services committee report exonerated Chubbe of any impropriety, despite some 'residual concerns'. The proofs had been checked and sent to the printers. That was when events took a strange turn.

The reports had changed. In their place was a full exposé of the activities of Chubbe and Bass, each mentioning the other. Intriguingly, only some of the reports were different, with most being in their intended form. This made things worse since it was easy to check what had been changed, added and deleted. They met in a private office.

'How dare you libel me in this way!' Chubbe shouted at Bass, looking as if he were about to explode.

Bass was a picture of calm. ‘I can assure you that if I were trying to ruin you, I would have found a more subtle and effective way of doing so.’ Chubbe had little doubt this was true. Bass continued coolly, ‘How do you think this could have happened?’

Bass had long ago learnt that the way to deal with angry people was to lower your voice and speak quietly and rationally. This could soothe the situation, but if not, it had the enjoyable effect of seeing them impotently irritated. She was delighted to see Chubbe squirming with frustrated anger.

‘How do I know?’ spluttered Chubbe. ‘I’ve seen the proofs, including the first print run. They were all correct. They must have been switched after they left the printers.’

Bass continued with irritating silkiness, ‘And who do you think could have done that?’

‘Who knows? That silly teenage hacker must have sent the data to some tree-hugging, planet-loving, capitalist-hating nutters,’ suggested Chubbe.

‘Ah, so you were hacked?’ Bass was not about to admit she had found evidence of hacking on her system.

‘The data loss was minimal. Anyway, she was paid off.’

‘Paid off? That will really help to prove our innocence,’ Bass said very steadily.

Chubbe stood up and pointed a trembling finger at Bass. ‘You did no better! Some of that information did not come from me. You must have been hacked too.’

It was time to feed the shark. Bass walked over to Chubbe and laid a consoling hand on his shoulder. ‘This has been difficult for both of us. Let’s sit down and work out a solution, shall we?’

Chubbe slumped back into the chair and nodded. Bass reached into her desk drawer and pulled out copies of their two reports. She opened the reports so that they could confirm the text was as originally intended. ‘Fortunately, I have the correct reports here. Call it insurance. Let’s get these copied and sent out. Then we’ll deal with that teenager and whoever received her data.’

She had expected Chubbe to ask how she had a copy of his report, but he was squinting at the pages and getting out his glasses. As she looked down at the copies, the text blurred and reappeared to reveal the truthful report.

It was rare to see Bass and Chubbe shocked into utter silence. They both checked the reports, but there was no doubt. From the polished, clean reports they had planned, they now exposed everything they thought was secret.

‘D-did you see that?’ mumbled an unusually pale Chubbe.

‘It must have been a trick of the light,’ suggested Bass, despite the clear memory of a text transforming itself. ‘More likely it’s a trick, one ink bleaches on exposure to light and the other darkens. Clever.’ In her mind she was already thinking of the business opportunities for this new ink technology.

‘But what about us?’ pleaded Chubbe.

‘Us? There is no “us”. You’re in a mess of your own making. I must limit the damage. What you do is your business.’

‘But I have contacts in government, useful contacts that could help both of us.’

Like Chubbe, Bass knew when charm was needed to snare someone useful. ‘Arthur, my apologies, this has been so incredibly stressful. Your help would be invaluable—any suggestions?’ To this she added a

mental note of ditching Chubbe the moment anyone found out about his bribing the hacker.

Chubbe was in official mode. ‘I’ll speak to cyber security at GCHQ. They’ll soon track down the hacker and whatever group used the data. We’ll then put out a story through our media contacts that the altered reports were a hoax. We can blame it on climate activists.’ Chubbe licked his lips at the thought of fossilising the fossil-fuel haters.

Bass had contacts of her own. ‘And I’ll speak to an acquaintance at the British Library about this new ink technology. She may tell us who was involved in the altered reports. Let’s crush this before it goes any further.’

Chubbe’s weighty head wobbled in agreement and he shook sweaty hands with Bass. Once Chubbe had left, Bass used disinfectant wipes to clean her hands, suspecting that she was going to need something stronger to get rid of Chubbe.