

# THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

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WILLOW OAK

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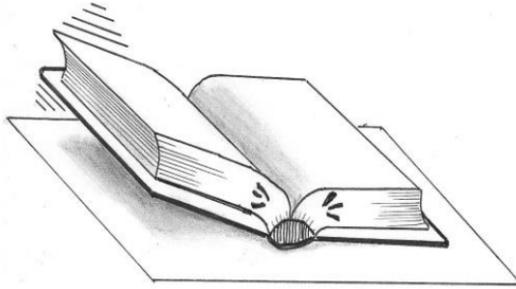
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## **This Book**

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>





## 8: THE BOOKS THAT TRIED

The coloured glows of Christmas had given way to the monochrome chills of winter. Family fun in the sun had become a huddle for warmth and protection. In contrast, Toby's walks to the Library were now adventures of slippery slides, scraping hoary frost from walls to throw in the air, feeling the frozen pinpricks on his face, and finding light-sabre-length icicles to do battle

with errant bushes. Snow had yet to arrive in any blanket amount, but the trees stood stark against the silvered ground and sky. There were some chills that sank to the bone, but this was a chill that stirred the soul.

Ahead he could see Mary and Geoffrey talking together enthusiastically, their breaths mingling in a soft mist. Mary was describing circles with her hands, while Geoffrey nodded in agreement with occasional responses. Both had been alone, but neither had understood their loneliness until they found each other. What they had not understood was that they were typeset in the same printing press. Everyone else could see it, even Toby, although that was because he had overheard the Bronty sisters discussing it in whispers. Whispers always made Toby's hearing more sensitive, in direct contrast to any shouts from his parents to tidy his room, presumably a built-in mechanism designed to protect a teenager's sensitive ears. For weeks, several of the books had tried to broach the subject with Mary.

Merrily had asked vaguely, 'Do you think you will settle down?'

'No thank you,' replied Mary, 'I've been sitting at my desk all day.'

Sharlot had been a little more direct. ‘Geoffrey seems a nice man.’

‘Most people who come into the library are very pleasant,’ replied Mary.

Tabitha Crispy had tried the analytical approach. ‘I see that you and Geoffrey have much in common.’

‘Yes, we both love books,’ agreed Mary.

Sir Donald Coil had gone for the forensic approach. ‘I have deduced from your demeanour and somewhat dated clothing that you and Geoffrey have both been rather lonely people, but the recent attention to your appearances suggests you are now looking for companionship.’

Mary pointedly ignored the sartorial accusations and curtly replied, ‘Who isn’t?’

Carl Chickens opined that ‘The impoverishment of the soul can only be mitigated by the love of another.’

‘How true,’ said Mary, dreamily avoiding the implied question.

Whilst playing with Amelia’s daughter Callie, they had discussed relationships and Amelia had asked if she

had found someone special. ‘Perhaps’ was the closest Mary came to acknowledging her feelings.

Eventually the Library decided enough was enough. As Geoffrey and Mary were huddled in a corner talking about the truth behind romantic literature the doors in front and behind them blurred, narrowed and disappeared.

‘Library, what are you doing?’ demanded Mary.

**‘You are staying here in Romance until you both come to your senses.’**

‘Library!’ Mary stamped her foot. ‘How dare you trap us here. Release us at once!’

Geoffrey put on his best council conciliatory voice. ‘It does seem an overreaction. What is it you want from us?’

**‘Honesty. To each other. About each other.’**

The mouth in the corner disappeared leaving a pair of eyes looking discreetly at the ceiling.

Mary was cross. She had realised what the others were asking but felt it was private between her and Geoffrey. This assumed that Geoffrey felt the same as her, but that was difficult to tell. In a crisis, Geoffrey was

decisive and assertive, but when it came to expressing feelings he was as definitive and assured as a wet blancmange. While she had a gift of accurately reading most people's feelings, she found it difficult to gauge the intention of moist desserts.

Geoffrey was puzzled. When he had woken that morning, he had not expected to be imprisoned by a library a few hours later. In his list of probable surprises, it was not a footnote, not even an annotation at the back of the book. He was trying to think through his options when he felt arms around his neck and a chaste kiss on his lips that lingered. The two stood together looking into each other's eyes, and never noticed the smug smile in the corner or the doors reappearing.

As they returned hand in hand, a ruffle of excited pages followed them.

'Well, about time,' said Amelia, accompanied by cheers and clapping pages.

'We would have got around to this, you know, in our own time,' Mary said, a little reproachfully.

**'Yes, in a century or so.'**

Giggles bounced around the shelves.

‘Perhaps we needed a nudge,’ Geoffrey agreed.

‘More like a mortar bomb,’ suggested Toby.

Mary looked tellingly at everyone, gripping Geoffrey’s hand. ‘Well, whatever the impetus, we are grateful. Thank you.’

Cordon and Gamey were already in the kitchen planning the engagement buffet and the wedding cake.

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Geoffrey and Mary travelled to the Central library to retrieve the remaining books. Several days before, they had started the process of transferring the books, but Crumble’s actions had stopped them after their first trip, so there were only a few boxes to bring back. Mary showed her pass and was given that day’s code for the archive. They pushed open the heavy door and went into the large room. Geoffrey switched on the fluorescent lights and they tinkled on in sequence across the ceiling to the far end, pushing the darkness away in a wave of flickering light. They walked to the back where they had felt the books would be safe. The boxes were on the shelf where they had left them but to their surprise some books were on the floor. They gathered all the books, returned

them to the boxes and walked back to the exit door. They were followed by a soft rustle of air.

Mary felt a cold breeze at the back of her neck. ‘Can you feel that?’

‘Yes.’ Geoffrey looked around uncertainly. ‘I suppose it’s the ventilation system.’

As they walked, they could hear more rustling, like pages turning in the wind, in a soft pillow of sound returning from the far end. Geoffrey and Mary walked faster and, as the sound caught up with them, they reached the exit, switched off the lights and shut the door. It was the silence that hit them and drained their faces of colour.

Mary shivered. ‘It didn’t feel like any ventilation I’ve ever felt.’

Geoffrey was relieved to be out of the room. ‘It was certainly strange; perhaps we’re just on edge after a trying few days. Let’s get back.’

Back at the Library they found Betty, Amelia and Gnarl telling their story to a hushed audience.

‘Callie picked it up straight away. It was odd, a silent fear,’ said Amelia.

‘We’ve just come from the central archive and we’ve had a similar experience,’ said Mary, holding Geoffrey’s hand tightly. ‘But we didn’t see anything like your book.’

It was a quiet group who unpacked the boxes and returned the books to their shelves. They sat down while Mary checked the catalogue.

‘We have a problem. Two books are missing.’

‘But we brought back all the books,’ said Geoffrey.

‘Well, some had been moved. They must still be in the Central library. We’ll have to go back tomorrow.’

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Charles Darwin had spent years thinking and developing his theories on evolution. Repeated notes and drafts had created many spare words which over time had found their way to the Library. The result was Smiles Darlin’s *In the Orifice of the Pieces*. Like his original author he suffered stress, grief and ill health, but unlike Darwin, Smiles never achieved contentment or respect. He was bitter that the words had sold him short, compounded by being filed in Medical, an insult that gave his bitterness a jagged edge. He had tempered his anger by working on a

theory that books could evolve further but complained of being stifled in his work by the Library. This was denied by the Library, who would say in an exaggerated theatrical voice, **‘You might say I have held him back, but I could not possibly say.’**

Now Smiles was free.

Smiles had a companion escapee. Stan Joker was one of life’s pranksters. Unlike Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, *Scapula* was about a vampire with shoulder blades sharp enough to give a paper cut, which, while less death defying, was no joke when doing the washing up. Stan loved any adventure, especially if it involved breaking the rules and embarrassing others. When Smiles had suggested hiding, he had sat on an upper shelf struggling to stifle his giggles at Mary and Geoffrey’s attempts to gather all the books. His giggles had quickly petered out when he realised how Smiles had precipitated their exit. As Smiles explained his plans, Stan had begun to realise that the joke was on him.

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The next morning the group gathered to discuss the experiences in the archive and bookshop.

‘We have to assume that the two experiences are connected. What do we do about Smiles and Stan?’ pondered Mary.

Theo was clear what they should do. ‘Leave them there – a bit of cold, dark storage will do them both good.’

Sharlot reflected, ‘Stan probably thought it was a great jape that would scare us all.’

‘But that doesn’t explain what Smiles is up to,’ added Merrily.

‘I never trusted him,’ said Theo. ‘Did you know he once asked me to build him a secret exit from the Library? I asked him why he didn’t just ask to go out, but he said the Library refused.’

Everyone looked up at the ceiling to hear what the Library had to say but it was unusually absent, even when Mary called.

The Library’s absence unsettled Mary. ‘That’s odd. I’ve only known the Library go missing twice before. Once during the London Blitz when it said it needed to help another library, and another time when it claimed it was speaking at a conference.’

‘How do libraries have conferences?’ asked Toby. ‘Do they exchange catalogue numbers and discuss the intricacies and foibles of the Dewey classification system?’ Toby looked up, expecting a sarcastic reply, but there was none.

Geoffrey tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. ‘Mary, how did you know the Library was missing during the Blitz?’

‘My predecessor must have told me,’ Mary lied.

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Mary and Geoffrey decided to return to the archive, Mary explaining that a librarian never abandons her books, no matter how irritating they might be. Sir Donald Coil insisted on coming along. He was intrigued by the experiences in the archive and the bookshop and wanted to see for himself. Theo was determined to join them with his handy tool belt. ‘I like to be prepared,’ he said in response to the puzzled looks. In truth he wanted to see what nastiness Smiles was up to this time. They arrived an hour before closing and entered the archive. Geoffrey switched on the lights but was met by darkness and silence.

Theo was used to working in tight, dark corners and extracted two torches from his belt. Geoffrey held Theo and Mary carried Sir Donald, each book holding a torch. The group moved forward, beams of light swinging across the space like searchlights awaiting approaching bombers. At the back were some old mahogany desks and one desk light switched on, illuminating Smiles.

‘So, come back to rescue us, eh?’ Smiles said with a scowl.

‘We’ve come to bring you back to the Library.’

‘Ha!’ Smiles threw his spine back. ‘I’ve spent years trying to escape that dungeon. I have no intention of returning.’

‘But you’re alone, you’ll be discovered,’ said Geoffrey.

The next desk light switched on. ‘He’s not alone,’ said Stan in a quiet, unconvincing whisper.

Smiles extended his pages. ‘We intend to be discovered, to show the world.’

All the desk lights switched on. At each desk was a book, standing up, scowling.

‘W-where did they come from?’ stuttered Mary, shocked by the spectacle.

‘They EVOLVED!’ shouted Smiles who began to rhythmically close and open his pages. The slaps and bangs of pages started to spread across the assembled books.

Sir Donald nudged Mary. ‘We’ve got to get out of here.’

‘Now!’ shouted Theo.

They ran to the exit, the crashing of the books becoming louder and closer. As they approached the door it slammed shut and locked.

Geoffrey held Theo next to the lock. ‘Can you help?’

‘I knew I couldn’t trust that Smiles,’ squirmed Theo as he pulled out various tools and attacked the lock.

Geoffrey could feel Theo bending and twisting in his attempts to unlock the door. ‘I don’t want to hurry you, well, perhaps I do, because the books are beginning to get off the desks and move towards us. I don’t like the look of them.’

Theo responded with a gritted ‘Humph’ and intensified squirming.

Mary was trembling, holding onto Geoffrey with one hand and Sir Donald with the other. Sir Donald was being his usual observant self, solid still with only his eyes darting at every detail.

The books stopped a few feet away but then started to climb over each other into a huge tsunami stack that rose rapidly above them, threatening to engulf them in tomes. In all the noise there was a ‘clonk’ and the door unlocked. They stumbled through and shut the door. On the other side the wave collapsed, spines and bindings crashing against the metal door, followed by the flops of crumpled pages. In the silence one book peered through the small window; it was Smiles shouting a tirade at them. All they could decipher was ‘Leave me alone!’

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Returning to warm chairs, tea and scones was a welcome relief. Even Cordon and Gamey’s fussing was unusually comforting. But most welcome was the return of a familiar voice.

**‘Sorry, I tried to help.’**

‘Where were you?’ asked Mary.

**‘I realised you needed help, but Smiles prevented me entering the archive room. I have never known a book to have such power. Instead, I visited a friend at another library.’**

‘I didn’t realise you could travel,’ stated Toby.

**‘Have you never heard of interlibrary loans?’**

‘But not of whole libraries!’

**‘That is because you do not think like a library.’**

‘Look, it’s hard enough thinking like an adult.’

**‘True.’**

‘You didn’t have to agree. Don’t libraries have bedside manners?’

**‘Only desktop ones.’**

‘I’m pleased you two are at each other again, but we need to do some thinking,’ chided Mary, back in practical librarian mode. ‘And stop looking at me like that, Geoffrey, I’m trying to be serious.’

Geoffrey loved her officious librarian look. It had an authority and softness combined, like a hard toffee with a melting interior. He lifted his head from his cupped

hands and cleared his adoring puppy stare. ‘Sorry, of course.’

Sir Donald came forward. ‘Mary is right to be concerned. During the events in the archive I was able to observe several facts. First, Smiles has a delusion of grandeur, but his delusion is not all imaginary. He has power. Second, Stan looked frightened and I suspect he is regretting this prank. That could be useful to us. And third, the other books had something very unusual about them. They were all blank, not a single word on their pages, no title, nothing. They have no purpose other than to serve Smiles.’

‘How has he done all this?’ asked Amelia. ‘Can books come alive without words?’

‘No,’ replied Mary, ‘that should not be possible. I have no explanation.’

**‘I may be able to partly answer this problem.’** The Library paused, with eyes upturned to give the impression of thinking, but really for dramatic effect. The Library was a frustrated actor.

**‘I have an association with the British Library. I do not yet have all the facts, but I suspect Smiles is**

**much older than we suspect. And a book by Ann Ford that was lost seems involved.'**

'Is that it?' asked Toby, having expected at least a tantalising glimpse into library life. The group looked at each other feeling they should go 'Ahh!' as if the revealed facts made any sense. Instead they managed a rather weak 'Oh.'

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Geoffrey and Mary made plans to go to London. Sir Donald and Theo's experience in the archive made them automatic candidates. Merrily and Sharlot politely insisted their viewpoint could help. Mary explained it could be difficult bringing too many books but agreed to one of the Bronty sisters.

Merrily and Sharlot went off in a huddle to have a determined conversation, all completed in fervent whispers. They decided Merrily would be the third book companion. Toby was not going to be left out. His half-term holiday was starting, and he suspected his parents would be thrilled at the prospect of him being exposed to any culture that was not on his phone or tablet. Amelia needed to look after Callie but promised to keep an eye

on everything while they were away, especially as Callie was getting to know more of the books and Gnarl would be by her side.

The next day they were on a train, discussing how the Library managed to travel. Toby wondered if it was hiding in Mary's small bag which he had imagined was magically and deceptively huge. Mary opened it to show him it was an ordinary bag, although she rapidly shut the bag to stop Toby spying some lacy somethings peeking out under her scarf and mittens. Toby's red face suggested she had not closed the bag soon enough.

Toby covered his glowing face with his hands and mumbled, 'Perhaps he's under the train, clinging on in desperation.'

'I think that would be beneath him,' suggested Mary, smiling. The smile did not help Toby's embarrassment.

Geoffrey suggested, 'I suspect his mode of transport will be a good deal stranger and quicker than ours. What intrigues me is the book the Library mentioned.' Geoffrey pulled out a notebook. 'I've been doing some research. During the war, many books were removed from central London to be safely stored elsewhere, but

they had not managed to move everything when the Blitz began.’

‘But I thought all the books were in the British Library,’ said Toby.

‘Only since 1997 when the new library building was opened. Even now many are held in storage at other locations. Before the new building, the books were held mainly in the British Museum and before that at Montagu House, the first building to house the British Museum’s collection.’

‘What happened to the book by Ann Ford?’ asked Mary.

‘Hundreds of books in the King’s Library were lost or damaged beyond repair when an incendiary bomb hit the British Museum on 23 September 1940. They tried to replace many of the lost books, but Ann Ford’s was never found.’

‘Were there other bombs?’ asked Mary.

‘Several more. The worst was on May 10th the following year when 250,000 books were damaged or destroyed.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See note

Mary looked distraught at the thought of so much history and culture being lost forever.

‘But what’s the link with Smiles?’ asked Toby. From Geoffrey’s briefcase could be heard three muffled acknowledgements from the books.

‘That is what we need to find out.’

## NOTE

1. Books destroyed or damaged during WW2 are listed in: Adrian S. Edwards (2013) *Destroyed, Damaged and Replaced: The Legacy of World War II Bomb Damage in the King’s Library. Electronic British Library Journal*. Article 8, p. 29 reports the loss of Ann Ford’s 1778 book.