

# **The Carpenter's Gift**

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# **DISCLAIMER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

## **Author's Note**

This story came to mind in March 2013, when we were making arrangements for my mother-in-law's funeral. Peggy rarely went to church, but even at ninety seven, she was a lively member of our community and extremely popular; a status founded on her love of life, a fantastic acuity and a keen interest on both World and local events.

She was a good person too.

Her somewhat haphazard attendance at church prompted us to ask the obvious, 'Will you have her?' Pat, the person who would take the service was unequivocal, "Peggy may not have been there each Sunday but she lived by Christian principles and that is just as important."

Her comment must have set a hook into my subconscious, because weeks later it came back to me in the form of Arnie Osborne.

This is a distinctly different genre to my other books, which is something I strive for, though as always, I hope you enjoy it.

**<http://www.jeffhawksworth.com>**

**Jeff Hawksworth**

# The Carpenter's Gift

## CHAPTER 1

She had brown hair, drawn into pigtails, a bright green jumper atop a blue denim skirt and spotlessly white socks that were housed in a pair of polished sandals; the traditional sort with creamy soles that would soon change to dirty grey.

She also had a one pound coin and a clear idea of what she wanted, "Please can I have some very pretty flowers for my mummy."

Arnie caught movement from the corner of his eye and glanced at the lady who was in charge of the child and who was urgently, though silently waving a signal to him with a twenty pound note. She was elderly; probably the girl's grandmother and her expression held a silent plea for him to join her conspiracy.

This was not a game. It might have been in another time or place and in other circumstances. Perhaps for a birthday, or mother's day; a moment of fun when grandma would have invited another to join in the pretence of allowing a five year old to buy a bouquet of flowers with her pocket money.

Instead, the lined face mirrored a depth of suffering he recognised instantly. He'd seen it so many times over so very many years.

He gave her a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of the head and grasped the counter for support as he dropped down onto one knee; so that he could speak to the girl at her own level, "Well, I think that's a lovely idea because I wouldn't mind betting she's a lovely mummy."

The girl nodded solemnly, "Only she's poorly at the moment, so I want to cheer her up."

"Wonderful! And you will, I promise. Now, do you know what sort of flowers she likes?"

She rested a forefinger on her lower lip and thought for a moment, glancing at the tiers of blooms before exclaiming, "Yellow ones." A further moment passed before, "And pink ones and purple ones."

"Then that is what she will have." Using the counter again, he pushed himself into a standing position before working his way along the stock, selecting enough of the chosen colours to make up a small bouquet. With a practised ease, he wrapped them in cellophane which he tied off with a golden ribbon. In the meantime, he had directed his two customers to a rack of cards and heard the child dictate to the elder, "To mummy. Please get better soon. Love from Hannah, kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss."

He stapled the card to the bouquet and addressed the child, "Well Hannah, I'm afraid I need to ask for payment now."

Hannah handed her pound coin over, as though it was an act of some ceremony and waited as he rang the sale up on the till. With equal ceremony, he placed a five penny piece in her

hand and said, "Here is your change." He knew that the giving of change leant an authentic air to the transaction and as he placed the bouquet in the girl's outstretched arms he added, "One thing is for sure, these will make her feel better. You'll need to hurry on now; it'll be visiting time soon."

As the little girl turned for the door, the lady, who was Grandma, made to palm the twenty pound note over to him, as though she was trying to discreetly pay a tip or bribe. He shook his head, much more visibly this time and smiled. The sort of smile that said, 'I'm terribly sorry to learn your news'.

She stared at him for a few moments; startled and as she comprehended his kindness and empathy her eyes filled. Nothing needed to be said, or could be, for it was their private collaboration. To play out an act for Hannah; one that pretended her mummy wasn't dying, down the road at the Leicester Infirmary.

"Come on Nan, we'll be late."

Her grandma nodded sharply at Arnie and moved towards the door where Hannah was waiting, but as she grasped the handle she looked back and whispered, "Thank you."

He moved to the door and watched them walk away, hand in hand. The bouquet had been surrendered up to 'Nan' for the moment, allowing Hannah to concentrate on avoiding the cracks on the pavement. His heart sank as he thought about their future.

## CHAPTER 2

Arnie Osborne was sixty eight years old; eight years past the retirement date they had planned and saved for. He certainly hadn't continued for the money, - he barely made enough to cover the overheads these days, particularly with so many Hannah's to serve and it wasn't because he enjoyed working.

It was because there was no alternative.

A God he once worshipped snatched Amy away from him, just four months before they were to retire. They had so many plans, so much stuff to do and so many places to visit. After two lifetimes of hard work they felt it was a right they had earned. The small florist shop on the Aylestone Road had demanded total commitment, seven days a week, for almost thirty years. Apart from the odd day trip on a coach, they hadn't felt able to take a holiday and whilst the accommodation above the shop had been small it was adequate, particularly since they hadn't had children. They had tried, but none came along, though as a consequence they became even closer. Often, things didn't need saying for one seemed to know what the other was thinking or feeling.

Until eight years ago; when the fates had acted with a cruel viciousness that had blighted every minute of his life since.

The cancer had overwhelmed her before they knew it and twice a day Arnie would close the shop and visit her in the infirmary, watching her descent into the maw of drugged containment.

They moved her to the St Giles Hospice for the last ten days, where they restored her dignity with care and decent surroundings, but he could never forget the geriatric ward she had been on in the hospital, with the images of pain, suffering, dementia and worst of all, degradation. One memory that still revolted him, were the sunken flaps of wrinkled lips, robbed of the false teeth that would have given their features a semblance of form. Instead, patients lay back, with eyes closed and mouths agape, as though praying for release; already cadavers in spirit.

False teeth; his stomach roiled at the thought of them.

Arnie turned back from the door and gazed at the rows of blooms; each one a unique and exquisite form. They were the only things he still had positive feelings for these days and of course, what he could do with them.

And there were the children, so many of them and all expecting a parent to go home soon, never suspecting that they were soon to be orphaned.

Not all the children brought pocket money; in fact, more often than not they came in with the other parent, who intended to make a purchase in the usual way. Sometimes, a child would mention their poorly parent and declare that he or she would be better soon. Then the adult with them would frown slightly or give a small shake of the head.

It didn't matter, for Arnie always recognised the signs and allowed the purchase to proceed without crisis, but he never, *ever*, allowed the child to leave the shop without their own gift of flowers.

Once, a father called back to settle up, but Arnie declined the payment. Already in an emotional maelstrom, the man said, "God bless you mister."

Arnie smiled and waved a hand in dismissal but as soon as the man left and the door closed he spoke, "Your son was welcome to the flowers *mister*, but you can keep your damned God. He's doing to you what he did to me." He gagged slightly, before adding, "And she was all I had."

He'd known she was the one, the moment she stepped into the shop, which was then owned by his father, and Arnie took extra care in choosing the flowers for her sick aunt. Three days later she called again and he was just as diligent, but as she was leaving he snatched up a fragrant pink rose and called after her. His heart pounded as he asked her, stumblingly, if they could perhaps meet for lunch.

Their love never faltered, even when his father retired and she gave up her job to join Arnie in the shop. It was as if it was all meant to be.

When Amy finally passed away, it was a release for both of them but by then he'd lost faith in a God that could inflict so much suffering on so many.

Now, pensions, property and a long retirement were no longer viable expectations. Instead, all he saw were the hopes, love and then despair of those who visited his shop.

One day, a man dressed in a grubby shell suit called in. He was unshaven and from the slight body odour, Arnie deduced he also needed a wash, but the chap seemed pleasant enough, if a little distracted. The selection of flowers seemed perfunctory and even after the money had been handed over he seemed reluctant to leave. It was clear he needed to talk to someone, so Arnie said, "You know, it's just a bit early for visiting and you don't want to be standing around with those flowers. Why don't you sit on that stool for a while and I'll put them back into water. Who are they for?"

The man smiled gratefully and handed the flowers back before sitting down, "They're for my wife. 'Ow did you know she was in hospital?"

Arnie gave a small shrug, "It's where we are. Almost all our customers are on the way to the hospital. We don't have much call from the candlelit dinner lot." He didn't enquire further. From experience, he knew that people needed to let go at their own pace.

This one didn't take long though. He wanted to share his crisis with anyone, "Well, see, I ain't been in work for a while now an' I know that Kirsty, that's the wife, has been worrying about 'ow we're going to manage, especially with the baby. I kept telling 'er it'll be alright but she wouldn't have it. Kept on and on she did, an' lately she's taken to crying a lot.

The bab is only three months old an' that's been difficult for 'er too. Only I never realised it was affecting 'er *that* much. To tell you the truth, the rowing was getting worse too; in fact I'd spent the night at me brother's when she must have done it. I came back 'ome yesterday teatime and I knew what she'd done, as soon as I saw the empty *Paracetamol* bottles. Good job too, 'cos I called the ambulance straightaway an' they took 'er to the Infirmary. They pumped 'er stomach out an' she was talking away, right as ninepence last night. If I hadn't got home when I did gawd knows what would've happened.

Anyhow, they said to go back today an' they'll have done some tests. So I thought, bugger it, I'll make do with bread and baked beans this week an' buy her some flowers."

Arnie knew all about *Paracetamol*, the pernicious killer that was sold as a benign painkiller. If ingested, the overdose victim would feel under the weather but soon rally round, or seem to. But a certain and agonising death from liver failure would come later, usually within days. It was all down to whether they'd got it out of her stomach before she'd ingested enough to be fatal. He couldn't enquire how long it had been for it wasn't his place to explain why he should ask such a question, but in the meantime, there was something he *could* do. Halve the price of the flowers and leave a little extra in the man's household budget.

The man couldn't understand Arnie's generosity and was disinclined to accept it, but Arnie thrust the change into the man's hand and said, "This is a 'get well' message from both of us. I haven't met your wife but I'm sure she's a lovely girl and I don't want her worrying about what you're going to do for food. Now off with you, there's a good chap. Go and tell her how much you love her."

Two hours later the man crept back into the shop, ashen-faced and barely able to look Arnie in the eye. Somehow, he gathered himself together, enough to say, "The missus said to say thank you for your kindness....." He faltered and looked up at a spot on the wall, above Arnie's head, trying desperately to contain the tears that were welling up. With an audible gulp, he tried to continue, but the dam burst.

'Arnie murmured, just loudly enough to be heard, "Take your time" and then waited patiently until the sobbing eased enough to permit speech. When it came, it did so in a rush, "They said she's goin' to die! It just don't make sense, she's sitting up in bed as perky as anything." His sobbing overwhelmed him once more.

Arnie strode forward and took the man's arm, "Come on son, you need a cup of tea, then you can tell me all about it." He directed the distraught victim into the small office behind the counter and shoved a pile of correspondence off the single armchair before allowing it to be occupied. Neither spoke as the teas were made, but when Arnie sat down in his hard-backed chair, next to the small desk, he asked quietly, "What's your name?"

The young man had regained control but his eyes were haunted when he looked up, "Danny, Danny Mellor."

They spent over an hour together. Some of it was spent talking and some in silent empathy on Arnie's part, as more horrors came to Danny's mind, prompting more tears. Keeping house; managing the tiny budget; cooking; washing and most of all, caring for a three month old baby.

He'd learned a lot that morning; about post-natal depression; attempts at suicide that were really cries for help; ones that could have such dreadful consequences.

Arnie knew that the time for misplaced hope was over, but grandparents needed to be recruited for childcare, the *Social Security* needed to be visited, in the hope of additional benefits and many more arrangements would need to be put in place. With pen to paper, Arnie helped to formulate the beginnings of a strategy but throughout, he was most mindful of yet another man who was soon to be a widower and another child, orphaned so needlessly.

Eventually, it was time for Danny to leave, but Arnie made him promise to call in every day, on his way to visit Kirsty and for the next six days, until she died Danny always had something for her. Sometimes a single red rose, but more often a small bunch of flowers. Not a single petal was paid for.

The single wreath on her coffin was quite modest and Arnie's last gift to the family.

## CHAPTER 3

The Reverend Stephen Markham was an electrical engineer for the first half of his working life and wasn't ordained until he was thirty eight, just three years ago. That depth of experience helped him to be the superb vicar he was; unfailingly supportive in both a spiritual and physical sense. Though Church of England, he didn't restrict his ministry to one faith for if he learned of anyone in his parish being treated in hospital, he'd be sure to say hello on his next visit; a practice that bewildered some of the elderly and devout Catholics who regarded him as a heretic. Be that as it may, they were soon charmed by his easy, comforting manner.

He never made demands or insisted on prayers, but he would gladly share them if sought, though a slightly risqué joke was often just as efficacious.

Lately, he had become aware of another's kindness. Several patients had pointed out their flowers and mentioned the generosity of the florist on the Aylestone Road. The shop was on the edge of the parish though he had never met the man and the measure of kindness shown to that young mother, Kirsty, made him want to do that, very soon.

The opportunity arose in September, when he decided to buy flowers for his wife, on their wedding anniversary.

It was perfectly civil to begin with.

The dog collar didn't bother Arnie. A man's choice of vocation and faith was his own affair, but once the price range had been chosen and the bouquet assembled, the vicar asked, "Is this the only florist shop on Aylestone Road?"

Arnie nodded, "Yes and I dare say there won't be any new ones, not while the superstores are selling flowers for less than I pay for them."

Stephen wore a sympathetic expression as he continued, "Well I'm very glad to have met *you*, though forgive me I don't know your name. Mine is Stephen Markham, I'm the vicar at St Margaret's."

Arnie shook the proffered hand, "I'm Arnold Osborne."

The vicar smiled warmly, "I'm delighted to meet you Mr Osborne. Your shop keeps being mentioned at the hospital and I've seen so many of your flowers there. Your generosity has really made a difference you know." He paused before continuing, "I consider myself blessed when I learn about people like you..." Arnie made to speak but Stephen held up a hand, "I don't know what your faith is Mr Osborne, but I would be honoured and delighted if you would come to St Margaret's and share a service with us. You're a true Christian."

Arnie snapped back, "I am not a Christian. I'm not anything, other than someone who feels sorry for those poor devils." He realised what he'd said and added, "Yes, devils. The poor sods can't have been Christian *enough* I reckon." This time he stalled the vicar's attempt to

speak by signalling towards the door, "I don't want to discuss the matter vicar, so if you'd prefer to give me back those flowers I'll refund you without a fuss."

Stephen was stung by the response but held onto the bouquet, "No, no, they're beautiful thank you. I'll keep them."

"Very well then, I'll say goodbye." With that, Arnie stepped past the counter and into his office, leaving the bewildered Stephen to make his own way out.

The collision had been serious, but both vessels soon returned to their usual courses, slightly battered but still afloat.

Days became weeks became months, until the first week in December when Leicester lay wetly under leaden skies and on the streets, smiles were scarce.

Hannah strode into the shop, towing a slim woman, dressed in jeans and a wonderfully warm-looking down jacket, topped off with a woollen bobble hat that was obviously for warmth rather than disguise, for it was clear that she had been bald recently. Her smile was as warm as she looked.

An older lady, who he recognised as 'grandma', followed them into the shop and gave him a small wave and an impish grin, "Hello again." He'd served them a few times since their first encounter and feared the worse when they stopped calling in.

His spirits had been as low as the barometer that morning but they were rising swiftly.

Hannah began, "Hello, we've come to buy some flowers again, only Mummy is paying for them herself today."

Arnie chuckled, "Good morning Hannah, a pleasure to see you again. Will you be helping to choose them?"

She gave an emphatic nod, "Yes."

'Mummy' stepped around Hannah and extended her hand, "Hello, I'm Helen Anderson."

He shook hands, "Arnold Osborne; Arnie, I'm pleased to see you up and about."

"And I'm pleased to be here, I can tell you." She glanced around before continuing, "You have some beautiful flowers. While Hannah and Mum choose which ones to take home, may we have a word in private please. Outside would do."

"Heavens no, not on a day like this." He gestured towards the doorway behind the counter, "We can go through there, if you don't mind a mess."

He made to clear the pile of brochures and newspapers off the armchair but she told him not to worry and waited for him to straighten up before saying, "Mum told me about your kindness and I've taken too long to come and say thank you."

Arnie waved a hand in dismissal, "I'd imagine you've had enough on your plate, so please, it was nothing."

Her smile slipped away, “Kindness is something I’ve come to appreciate in the last few months, but when it comes from a stranger it has a particular value and I really wanted to tell you how much it meant to me.”

In the light of her gratitude, he felt able to nod at her head and ask, “How are things going?”

The smile returned, “Had my last chemo a month ago and have just had the all clear, at least for the moment.”

“That’s excellent news, congratulations!”

Just then a plaintive call came from the shop, “Mummee, hurry up, we’ve picked them.”

Arnie feigned alarm, “It looks as though I have an impatient customer.”

Helen rolled her eyes and gestured for him to lead the way out.

When they left the shop, he remained at the counter for a few minutes, cherishing someone else’s joy for once, instead of sharing their grief, but then he stepped into his little office and saw the light vellum envelope on the centre of the desk. Helen must have left it, for it certainly wasn’t there before.

Inside, he found a fifty pound note with a hand written letter that read;

Hopefully, by the time you read this, we shall have introduced ourselves but in the meantime I shall have to do without addressing you by name.

Firstly, I hope the enclosed will cover the shortfall in Hannah’s purchases, though I am only referring to monetary value.

I don’t have a currency or wit to measure the value of your kindness but I can tell you what it managed to do.

To be honest, I had pretty well given up hope. My husband had left me for a newer model six months earlier and when they diagnosed cancer I thought my life was heading for hell in a hand basket.

But then my daughter marched into the hospital ward with a beautiful bouquet; proud as punch, because she'd bought it with her own money. She told me that she'd bought it because I needed cheering up and the nice man at the flower shop had promised it would make me feel better too. She added that the flowers had cost nearly all of her pocket money, which seemed a little strange, since she only gets a pound a week. Mum told me what had happened when she visited that evening and by that time she had been back and tried to settle up with you.

It was a difficult time and your generosity moved both of us. Strangely, that modest show of emotion opened the floodgates. I won't bore you with the details but we

discovered a lot about each other that night and spoke of things we should have done long before.

But from that moment on, I began to fight.

I intend to stay in touch and to buy lots of flowers, at the correct price, because I would very much like to be friends with you.

With kind regards,

Helen Anderson.

He remained in good humour for the rest of that day; until he fell asleep that night.

Arnie had always had vivid dreams; in his youth, embarrassingly so, but of late they had been anxious affairs, filled with impossible problems which left him feeling jaded and weary in the mornings. Some he remembered, but for the most part, the only evidence of stress was the tangle of bedclothes he had to struggle free from, either in the morning, or in the middle of the night when an aching bladder threatened to make matters worse.

He did remember the one he had that night though; in fact he would never forget it.

*He didn't know the who, what, or where, but he was seated on a hard-backed chair that had a coarsely woven seat, or at least his sore backside was telling him as much. Somehow, he'd been tasked with a cleaning job, one he would never have taken on consciously, but in the dream he had no choice in the matter. In fact, he was terrified at the thought of failure. He'd been given a tiny brush and a bucket filled with filthy opaque water and knew that whatever needed cleaning lay at the bottom, but the murk defeated his attempts to see what was in there.*

*Eventually, he plunged his right hand into the water; almost up to his elbow, before he felt them. There seemed to be quite a number of hard irregular-shaped objects, one of which he withdrew, in his clenched fist. Once clear of the bucket, he opened his hand to reveal a slimy denture.*

*Images from the hospital ward reared up at him. Those sunken, wrinkled lips; hanging loosely around mouths that were agape. The last shreds of dignity lay in the bedside lockers with their dentures*

*He threw up, spectacularly.*

*The force that had been present since the beginning of his dream now compelled him to keep hold of the disgusting object and so the retching continued, until he could only produce traces of bile. Eventually, exhaustion brought his vomiting to an end, though by then his stomach was sore and aching from the strain. He collapsed sideways against a wall and gained a little comfort from the cool rough surface. The wall just happened to be there, as his dream evolved, but he still had no idea where he was, only that he was exhausted. That much, at least, helped him cope with his task, dulling his mind to the terror.*

*He began to scrub, but the dentures were badly stained and carried a rancid odour, presumably from the scraps of brownish matter; possibly fruit, still caught between the teeth. He hurriedly closed his mind to that thought but it took an hour to return them to the original pink and white. Somehow, he sensed that he was being given leave to set them down on the floor beside him but there could be no rest.*

*Steeling himself, he plunged his hand into the bucket once more and withdrew another denture. This time he only gagged slightly, for he was determined to end this nightmare as quickly as possible.*

*This denture was not as badly stained and the scraps of whitish grey matter came away from the teeth easily, so that it took only half the time to bring them up to scratch. Encouraged, he withdrew the next one.*

*And threw up once again.*

*The stench of the grease that coated it was unimaginable and some of it now covered the palm of his hand. How on earth could anyone have had these in their mouth? This time he attacked them with a crazed frenzy but bits of fish and bone were embedded in every crevice.*

*The hours passed. Some of the dentures were easy, like the one that had little more than grit and sand to remove whilst another was almost impossibly stained reddish brown; either blood or wine he decided, but the last denture was unique.*

*Arnie glanced at the collection on the floor and counted twelve. Bloody typical! The last set just had to be the thirteenth. They didn't stink and weren't particularly greasy, but by God, they were going to be the worst. How the hell was he going to clean a wooden denture? Someone must have carved them, he supposed, but who in their right mind would wear them? The proportions were right but the grainy texture would defy any attempt at cleansing.*

*Worse still, he realised that the bristles on his brush had been worn down to almost nothing, yet once again; he knew there was no choice in the matter. He had to finish.*

*Rubbing them between his fingers and thumb failed miserably as did his attempt to use the corner of his shirt. The brush was still the only viable tool he had but another attempt to use it confirmed that it was all but useless. In temper, he hammered the surface with it and to his horror, the denture split into two.*

*Arnie nearly wept. As he stared at the debris all thoughts of exhaustion and anger were replaced by fear. Who or whatever had made him work all night would know of his act of vandalism. For want of anything better, he pushed the two halves together and knew that a spot of superglue would do the trick, just as he knew that this nightmare wouldn't allow him any. His fear grew, until he heard a keening sound; one that spoke of the same sort of terror he was experiencing. Minutes passed before he realised that the sound was coming from him, from the depths of his being.*

Arnie woke. He was soaked in sweat, in spite of the fact that half his bedclothes were off the bed and the room was bitterly cold. His pulse was racing and his head throbbed as he rolled out of bed and hobbled to the bathroom to empty an aching bladder. Normally, he would have showered and shaved before heading to the kitchen but this morning he needed the comfort of tea and toast first and threw his dressing gown on.

It worked too. He sat at the kitchen table, nursing a mug of tea, waiting for the excess of butter to melt into the warm toast. He always waited until the salty butter was three quarters melted before starting to eat and it was never less than excellent.

A mental check confirmed it was Sunday and he wouldn't open until ten-thirty, though there would be few, if any, customers until two-o'clock, in advance of the three-o'clock visiting hour.

"Come."

He stopped eating and looked around, trying to work out where the sound came from and what it meant. There was no-one else in the room and in any event, he was having difficulty in deciding what direction it came from. So was he still dreaming? Was the nightmare still in progress?

He answered that one by dipping his finger into the tea and then stuffing the scalded digit in his mouth for comfort. "Silly bugger!" He spoke out loud, as much for reassurance than anything else and realised just how tired he was.

Which left only one possibility; he was imagining things; most probably *thanks* to a lack of sleep. Arnie didn't know what to make of it really, but he resolved to go and see his doctor, the next day. Perhaps some sleeping tablets would help. In the meantime, a shower would.

Arnie dressed in the usual outfit, in the usual way; vest, socks, underpants, shirt, trousers and jumper, in that order. Yet this time, he couldn't shake the sense of being watched. A little like the times Amy would watch him while enjoying her cup of tea in bed. Sometimes she would question his choice of shirt or jumper and suggest another. On Sundays in particular, he always wore his slippers in the shop and as he slid one foot in, his choice of footwear seemed to be in question as the same voice spoke again.

"Come."

He didn't try to explain things away this time. Instead he looked around the room and called back, "What do you mean? Where are you? *Who* are you."

The silence unnerved him and in due course made him angry; with himself as much as anything else.

He slipped his other slipper on and made for the door. This nonsense had to stop!

The fragrance swept over him as he rounded the end of his bed and within a few feet, he realised that the whole room was full of it; a scent so magnificent it represented all that he had ever found in a bloom – and more. His senses reeled and tried to make sense of it, yet he was relishing the experience as well. How could anyone fail to?

*La Riene*, - bred by a Frenchman named Jean Laffay in eighteen forty two. Their scent beggared belief, but the flowers were magnificent too and quite unlike other roses; with densely packed petals that formed globe-like blooms.

But Arnie also knew that it was a summer rose and a fickle traveller, which was why they had never been able to buy them from abroad during the winter.

Yet this was the real thing, he had no doubt about that, for no-one could re-create such a symphony of olfactory grace

He knew all this because it was his single most favourite flower; the one he had snatched from the tub and given to Amy the day he first asked her to step out with him.

As if on cue, the same voice spoke to him once more, “Come.”

In that moment, Arnie knew that he hadn't been imagining things. At some level, somehow, it was real and whilst he didn't yet understand why, he knew where he had to go. Almost trancelike, he switched to outdoor shoes.

St Margaret's was a Victorian gothic slab of a place, built of red bricks with geometric patterns defined in blue ones.

Inside, the nave was a huge open area filled with oak pews. Aisles on both sides were separated from the main area by arches built of light brickwork, supported by sandstone pillars. A large rose window with a smaller one on each side lit the chancel where a very contemporary oak alter predominated.

In one corner, a rather clumsy looking wooden structure had leaded glazed doors that opened to reveal the organ; its golden pipes housed in an open structure above. The whole area was lit by huge theatrical spotlights that must have cost the earth to run.

Arnie thought it was pretty unremarkable. Even the plain wooden pews were just as uncomfortable as most. He sat in one, beside a pillar, halfway down and well away from the rest of the congregation. Everyone wore heavy winter coats and some huddled together for warmth. They were a depressing sight, just like the grey wet weather outside.

The Reverend Markham made a point of checking his congregation out, during the first reading. Today it was being taken by the most senior church warden, Walter Cummings, a very able reader and one that didn't need scrutiny.

It was the usual faithful few, their weekly offerings woefully shy of the church's quota but he suddenly caught sight of a single male, sitting to one side, almost out of view. The features were familiar and later, he would acknowledge that his initial failure to recognise the man was because he'd never expected to see him in St Margaret's, or any other church for that matter.

The vicar was delighted and resolved to have a chat with the elderly florist at the end of the service, hoping that the response would be a little warmer this time, though at that moment Mr Osborne showed no sign of following the service. Instead he seemed to be lost in thought.

He was too.

She was wearing a corduroy pinafore dress that delighted the eye with its pattern of gold and mauve flowers and the white cotton polo neck jumper drew the eye upwards to a smile that included her hazel eyes as well.

He would never forget that dress, or the diffident charm with which she asked for advice in the choice of flowers. He'd readily explained the need for sturdy blooms, able to withstand the high ambient temperature of hospital wards and went on to offer a selection of recommendations.

His heart sank as he acknowledged once again, that he'd fallen in love on that day as well and now he was alone, in a cold church on another wintry morning in the wintry remains of his life. The moment was gone. Cherished memories snuffed out by present day realities.

What on earth was he doing there? Worse, had he really begun to hear voices? Was it a sign of incipient dementia? One just more step along the miserable trail into old age.

He'd been running on autopilot since putting his shoes on, unable or unwilling to think about the experience, but the hard pew, cold church and his solitude prompted questions.

There was one consolation; the service only lasted an hour. After then he could get back to the shop where his beautiful bright flowers would confound the grey day and lift his spirits. In the meantime he stood, sat and kneeled as directed, until the third hymn, when the warden began making his rounds with the offering plate.

Arnie whispered, "Damn" to himself. He hadn't thought to bring any money. How embarrassing!

He patted his pockets for change, knowing there wouldn't be any. Trousers coat and jacket. All empty, until he reached the left hand pocket of his jacket. There *shouldn't* have been anything in there, but there was; something hard and quite large for that pocket. He pulled it out and looked down at the object he'd only ever seen once before.

His pulse seemed to slow and his breathing became shallow as he tried to make sense of it.

It was impossible, absolutely impossible and at more than one level. Firstly, it didn't, or at least shouldn't exist and even if that could be explained, he was sure they never made wooden ones. Furthermore, they were intact. The last time he'd seen them they were broken.

Walter, the church warden noted the man's embarrassment at not having anything to put on the plate and also noticed his attempt to hide whatever was in his hand. 'Whatever', he thought; it was none of his business. Folk could bring whatever they liked into church, provided it didn't disturb or upset the others.

Arnie was so relieved when the vicar's prayer of dismissal marked the end of the service. His only thought now, was to get home for a cup of tea, but laced with a hefty belt of scotch this time. There was no-one Arnie could talk to for he knew that as the listener, he would suspect that a nervous breakdown was in progress, at the very least.

After a few moments of silent prayer, the members of the congregation began to leave their pews and head for the door, but as Arnie grasped the edge of the pew in front, the voice he now recognised said, "Stay." There was no doubting it and what was more; it was said loudly enough for him to glance around, yet no-one else showed any sign of hearing it. Was this an elaborate hoax? Were there cameras somewhere? They wouldn't have broken into his flat surely and who would want to do it anyway. He didn't know anyone who would try such a thing.

No-one showed any interest in him until one elderly man smiled and nodded as he made his way to the door, which was enough for Arnie to make his own exit. This madness had to stop. He had to get home, right now.

He was halfway out of his seat when the voice repeated itself, "Stay." It was as loud as before, yet gentle; a request more than an order.

Arnie was out of his seat by then and felt a tiny movement in his hand. It was an independent movement, not of his making, since he'd only been holding the object loosely. Moments passed while he steeled himself to open that hand and when he did he slumped back down onto the pew with a small cry. The wooden denture was exactly as he remembered it, but not from earlier in the service. It was exactly as he remembered it in the dream; after he had broken them. The two halves rested in his palm; demanding belief.

He sensed movement nearby and looked up to see Reverend Markham sidling along the pew towards him, obviously intending to speak. He put the denture into his pocket and nodded to the vicar, "Good morning."

It was the signal Markham had hoped for. Peace not war. "Hello Mr Osborne, it's lovely to see you."

Arnie spoke truthfully, "I suppose you're surprised to see me, almost as much as I am at being here."

The vicar chuckled, "Then let's not to question it. We can agree to take some pleasure from it, perhaps."

"Aye perhaps."

By now, they were the only ones there, save for the warden, who was stacking the hymn books away. A short silence followed before the vicar asked tentatively, "Is there something you wanted to talk about?"

Arnie replied immediately, "Oh, no, thanks. I just want to sit quietly for a while."

The vicar had the wit to realise that 'quietly' meant alone. "Of course, you're very welcome. Though forgive me, I have to take the communion service at St Jude's in half an hour, so I'll leave you in peace. Mr Cummings will lock up when you've finished. Take as long as you like." He pointed at the huge overhead lights and asked, "Would you mind if we turn those things off? There should be enough natural light at this time of day and they cost an arm and a leg."

"No, of course not."

As he headed for the vestry, at the back of the church, the vicar signalled for Walter to follow and once there, closed the door so that Arnie couldn't hear. "I am sorry Walter, but that chap is someone quite special and he's asked to sit for a while. I've got to get away to St Jude's so would you be kind enough to hang on until he's finished and then lock up please?"

Walter was quite put out, "Did he say how long he'd be? Only we've got the kids coming over for lunch and I need to get back to help the wife."

"No, he didn't say, but I'm sure he won't be long. It's too cold in there for one thing."

"Humph, it's not very considerate, in my opinion, though I suppose I don't have a choice. I'll make myself a cup of tea and if he hasn't finished by the time I've had that I'll have to ask him to leave."

With the pragmatism necessary for dealing with volunteers, the vicar accepted the compromise, "Thanks very much Walter. I really appreciate it." He patted Walter on the shoulder and ran for the door. He might just make it to St Jude's in time.

Walter made his tea and dug out the secret stash of biscuits, only a privileged few knew about before settling down with a copy of the diocese news. In truth, he enjoyed the silence of an empty church. With a hint of bitterness he reminded himself that it wasn't actually empty.

Ten minutes later he couldn't believe his ears, when he heard a woman speaking. He mumbled, "This is ridiculous, it's becoming an open house!" With that he jumped to his feet, determined to put a stop to it and get home. At that time of year, with the spotlights off, there was enough natural light to move around safely but the church was fairly gloomy. Or it should have been.

The door to the vestry was around a corner, but the glow from the nave was immediately noticeable. Walter's first thought was that the man had turned some of the lights back on and prepared to remonstrate with him but once around the corner he stopped in his tracks and stared at the impossible.

No lights were on, at least electrical ones. Instead a column of blinding light shone down from *somewhere*, onto the man sitting by the stone column. Only now, by squinting, Walter saw that he wasn't alone. He watched as Arnie put his arms around the small elderly lady who was seated next to him and she rested her head on his shoulder. He couldn't see anymore than that from where he stood, so he didn't see them holding hands or the happiness on their faces.

What he *did* see was enough to send him scurrying back to the vestry where he misdialled twice in his haste but eventually got through to the vicar, who'd just reached St Jude's. There was no time for preamble, "Vicar! You need to get back here, now, straightaway. There's something strange going on."

In the next parish Markham frowned, "Whatever for? What's happened Walter."

"I can't say. It's too strange. Please, you need to get back here."

"Look, I'm sorry Walter, but I can't just wander back like that. Be more specific."

Walter could barely believe what he was saying, "I think there's a miracle happening. Please vicar, come quickly."

Markham sensed the awe and fear in Walter's voice and gave in, "OK, I'll nip in and ask the lay person to take the service; they'll have to do without me and communion today."

Walter almost wept, "Thanks vicar, thanks a lot."

He crept back into the nave, fearful yet compelled, but was profoundly disappointed to find the nave as gloomy as it always was. His first thought was that he'd imagined it, particularly when he saw that the man by the pillar was alone. He was slumped slightly and looked as though he dropped off to sleep.

By now the poor warden was in turmoil. Somehow, he had to restore some order, beginning with sending the man home and then he needed to think about what he was going to tell the vicar. He stepped around the pillar and trod on something hard and large enough to be uncomfortable. As a result, he was reaching down to pick it up as he gently shook the man by his shoulder.

Arnie's body fell over onto its side. His half-open eyes told Walter the poor chap was dead, though he had the most serene expression.

In that moment, Walter realised that there was now sufficient cause to have called the vicar back, without having to mention a strange light, though regrettably, his wife would have to cook lunch without him. Immediately ashamed of himself for such self-concern, he knelt at a nearby pew, to say a prayer for the man's soul. But before he clasped hands, he looked at the object he'd picked up. It was a rectangular scrap of very old wood, around eight centimetres long and a three centimetres square. Wholly unremarkable, except for the pungent fragrance it was giving off. It was for that reason alone that he put it in his pocket before continuing with his prayer.

Markham hurried back into the church to find Walter seated in a pew close to where Mr Osborne had been seated. He closed to within a few yards before calling softly, "Walter, I'm back; what have you got to show me?"

His warden seemed to come round from a daze, "Sorry Vicar; miles away." He pointed at the pew two rows ahead, "I think the poor chap has passed away."

Markham couldn't see the slumped figure until he reached the end of the row and then he felt obliged to take the man's wrist in search of a pulse, though his knowledge of first aid would have been woefully shy of effective if he had detected one. For that matter, he didn't trust his ability to find a pulse anyway and asked, with some urgency, "Have you called an ambulance?"

Walter looked up askance, "But he's dead." He paid little heed to the vicar's rush outside to be certain of getting a decent signal for his 999 call.

Walter had been correct in his assessment though, which was confirmed by the paramedic within a minute of arrival.

By that time, the police had arrived and Walter had given up all hope of eating his Sunday dinner, let alone helping with its preparation. Cups of tea were furnished while statements were taken and the biscuits were lost to procedural necessities. But when it was all over and Markham was alone with his warden, he asked, "Walter, you said on the 'phone that it was a miracle; what did you mean?"

Walter appeared to be embarrassed, but he'd prepared for this, "Oh, poor choice of word really, I didn't mean put it that way, but it was so upsetting to see him keeled over like that."

Markham thought it was a very strange word to have chosen in those circumstances but left it at that, which left Walter with *his* thoughts. In the heat of the moment, Arnie's death masked what had happened just before, but since then the imagery of that light and the couple that sat in its grace threatened to overwhelm him. 'Yes', he thought, 'grace' seemed to be the right word.

After the post mortem arrangements were made for the funeral directors to collect the body and they in turn, appointed someone to check the house and clear the stock out of the shop. Thankfully, Arnie had kept his documents safely and they soon found a sleeve in his filing cabinet labelled 'Wills'.

There was only one known relative; Amy's elder brother, who lived in Yorkshire and was the sole beneficiary under the will. The solicitor who was acting as executor got in touch with him to learn that no-one from up there would be attending the funeral and that he should just attend to things as he saw fit. Her brother wasn't a Yorkshire man by birth but he had certainly become one by nature, as he explained to his daughter, "What, spend all that money visiting a corpse, when we hardly ever saw each other in the flesh?"

Meanwhile, Markham intercepted the arrangements to have Arnie's body processed at the crematorium and insisted on having a service at St Margaret's. When he asked Walter if he would care to attend, the implication was clear. He'd witnessed the man's spiritual departure from this life so it would be fitting to witness his physical departure too, though at a more practical level, they could also be certain of having a congregation, albeit of one.

In fact, Walter was joined by Helen, her mother, a few neighbours and three nurses from the Leicester Infirmary, who were all moved by the vicar's short eulogy. He closed by saying with a wry smile, "Mr Osborne held some very firm views on religion, some of which I didn't

agree with, but I also know that he abided by the very best of Christian values. For that, I would ask you to join me in celebrating a life that touched many others.”

## CHAPTER 4

It was over a month before Walter had to wear that suit again, for a meal out with his son and daughter-in-law.

In that time he had given much thought to the light that had shone on Mr Osborne and the more distant the memory became, the less reliable his recollections seemed. For one thing, he had never been a believer in miracles. He did believe in freak weather conditions though, there were so many of them these days. On that particular day, the weather had been overcast to a leaden degree and the light quality had been dreadful, to such an extent that a break in the clouds would have resulted in a beam of sunlight that could easily have contrasted to the degree he'd seen.

One thing was for certain, he was glad he hadn't mentioned it to the vicar, or anyone else for that matter.

During the evening he had cause to dip into his pocket and found the chunk of timber he'd picked up in the church that morning. He was pleased to find that it was as fragrant as ever.

His son, Mathew, saw his father savouring the scent and asked, "That looks like a piece of old railway sleeper; not into sniffing creosote now are you?"

Walter smiled and handed it over, "What do you make of that?"

Mathew was a keen wood turner and recognised the scent immediately, "That's a piece of cedar, recently worked too." He frowned, "That's odd though." He scratched at the rough surface and looked puzzled, as he explained, "This is an old piece of timber, *very* old by the looks of it, so it shouldn't still have this scent. Doesn't add up."

Walter shrugged his shoulders. "Don't ask me Mathew, you're the expert."

"Where did you get it?"

For some reason, Walter felt disinclined to tell the truth and settled instead for, "I can't remember now. Probably when I was out walking."

Mathew shook his head, "Well I'm not expert enough to explain this. It's weird." He thought for a moment, rolling the wood in his hand before asking, "Dad, can I borrow this. I've a mate who works in the labs at De Montfort University. They've been doing some work on the King Richard excavation so he might be able to make sense of this for me. At least he'll be able to explain the scent versus age thing. Mind if I borrow it?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders once more, "Go ahead, I've got no use for it."

Five days later Walter took the call from his son; he sounded uncertain and tense, "Dad, you know that piece of wood I had off you?"

"Yep."

“Well my pal from De Montfort has just called to say that a professor wants to see me as soon as possible. Since it was your bit of wood I thought you might like to come along.”

“That sounds intriguing. Yeah, I’d love to go with you.”

“Fair enough, I’ve agreed to go there at ten thirty tomorrow morning so how about I pick you up around ten?”

“Fine, but didn’t he tell you anything else?”

“No, he flatly refused to say anything on the ‘phone. See you tomorrow.”

They were expected at the university reception and were soon signed in and badged-up, before being escorted through a maze of corridors to a small laboratory, where a middle-aged man and Mathew’s friend were waiting. Both were in white lab coats and the younger man introduced his senior, “This is Professor Jennings. He is one of the senior heads of our archaeology department.” They shook hands and the visitors accepted an offer of coffee, which was relayed to someone beyond an opposite door.

Professor Jennings didn’t waste time, “Thank you for coming in to see me and thank you for such an interesting specimen.” He pointed at the piece of wood lying on the bench top in a specimen bag, much smaller than Walter remembered.

Jennings continued, “To be quite frank, this has us slightly puzzled.” He looked at Mathew, “Your misgivings about the odour being at odds with the apparent age were well – founded. To begin with, we carried out tests to establish whether it had been treated. Specifically; soaked in cedar oil. It really is a distinctive odour isn’t it?”

Walter and Mathew agreed.

“Well, the tests proved that it hadn’t been. In fact, it was at that point I noticed something else that was strange and I called in a colleague to work with me.

You see, we couldn’t find *any* modern day contaminants. When trying to date something like this we use a process called radio carbon dating. I’m sure you’ll have heard of it.” He didn’t wait for their confirmation and continued, “Normally, we can date something of this age to plus or minus seventy five years, taking into account modern day contamination, some of which we can remove, but on this occasion, as I said, we couldn’t find any contamination at all. So with that in mind we took a sample and reduced it down to just the cellulose component; to stay with the ‘*purity*’ concept even further. Cellulose is less likely to have exchanged carbon with the environment, so accuracy is improved. Unfortunately, it entails using a lot of material, almost a hundred grammes in fact, which is why you have such a small piece now.

In essence, if you’ll pardon the pun, the purity of the sample has allowed us to predict a much more accurate date than we would normally and I should add that my colleague arrived at the same conclusion I did, exactly and quite independently. Where did you find this?”

Walter answered, “I’m really not sure, someone must have dropped it and I hung on to it because of the nice scent.”

Jennings looked as though he was going to question that response, but eventually he shrugged his shoulders, “Well, in less enlightened times you might have gotten away with calling this a relic and stuffing it in a glass case. After all it came from the Middle East.”

He was obviously joking but Walter saw no humour. He was having difficulty breathing in a room that had suddenly become oppressively hot, “What, you mean, Jerusalem?”

Jennings was still smiling as he shook his head, “Well no, I can’t be that precise, but the dendrochronology tests indicate that it came from the Middle East, given other knowns, not least of all where *Lebanon Cedars* could be found at that time.”

Mathew was frowning as he spoke, “I’m not sure I understand what you’re getting at; about relics and such like.”

“Why, the age of the sample of course. As I said, we feel able to be unusually specific, because of the special characteristics of the sample.”

He picked up what was left of it, as if to emphasise his point, “This tree was felled in the year 30AD, plus or minus twenty years. Some zealots might be inclined to think it was part of the original cross.”

Walter didn’t say anything, for he was barely breathing, but his mind’s eye held an image he would cherish for the rest of his life; of an elderly couple bathed in light.

He hadn’t realised it at the time, but it had been his moment of grace too.

**Books by the same Author**

# **Graham's Chronicles**

## **A Heart Warming Trilogy**

The trilogy, including a significant amount of research, has spanned four years but the idea stemmed from a particularly vivid dream three years before that. Unusually, I remembered every detail when I woke, to such an extent that I threw on my dressing gown and went downstairs to spend an hour or so writing notes. I returned to bed, threw them in my bedside draw and said to my wife, "I reckon there's a book there you know!" They lay there for three years before seeing daylight again, but the first volume is remarkably true to those notes.

Visit my website for more information

<http://www.jeffhawksworth.com>

# **A Child's Eye View**

## **Graham's Chronicles I**

Graham Parsons is a man ordinaire whose well-ordered life is changed beyond measure when he witnesses the manslaughter of a 7 year old boy, Christopher. Whilst holding the dying child he experiences a profound out of body experience and minutes later suffers a life threatening attack, leaving him with permanent disabilities.

His recovery brings with it a telepathic connection with children who need help that threatens his sanity, marriage and eventually his life. His tale of discovery begins with a fearful and confused denial which takes him to the edge of reason until eventually, he accepts and employs his remarkable gift with a charming pragmatism that disarms doubters and helps to salvage blighted young lives. His simple, candid honesty wins the support of four friends from very different backgrounds; Christopher's mother, a GP, a Child Protection Officer and a Detective Sergeant.

# **Graham's Gang**

## **Graham's Chronicles II**

Graham has come to terms with his special gift. A telepathic connection with children who need help, but his efforts to help them are often accompanied by calamity.

The tiny group who know his secret decide he needs their protection, but just how effective can Nancy, his partner, a GP, a social worker and an overweight detective sergeant be?

They are joined by Harvey Calder, a wealthy business man. He and his wife Audrey are indebted to Graham for saving their granddaughter's life, which prompts them to give Graham, Nancy and their foster child, Jimmy, a holiday of a lifetime. But 'life' takes on a whole new meaning when Graham confronts an American, set to become a Senator, who will do anything to discredit and remove a threat.

Graham's false imprisonment does just that and the situation seems back under control, but no-one has told the Senator about the Hell's Angel, 'Big Bob'.

# Help Out House

## Graham's Chronicles III

Graham Parsons is back in England, a fugitive from US law, but his freedom is still threatened by a vengeful US Senator and extradition.

His life goes on hold, in a stasis of anxiety while in America, Chrissy Haddon and her mother confront their own demons of abuse and alcoholism. Is it time for Senator Haddon to answer for his deeds and make amends?

The Gang rally to Graham's side once more, with support and practical help on both sides of the Atlantic that become quite extraordinary. But like Graham, with his telepathic connection with children needing help, they all know others would think their experiences were no more than fiction.

As things begin to fall apart help comes from an unexpected source and the US State Department are persuaded to join in.

Meanwhile, in Leicester, Lori is a frightened fifteen-year old, trapped in a world of drugs and prostitution. Yet in the darkness shines a tiny glimmer of defiance. Only she knows her real name is Marya, until she sees Graham's advertisements and 'puts her message in a bottle', triggering a dreadful reaction which causes Graham to suffer one of his worst nightmares.

# Graham's Chronicles

The following is a small selection of reader reviews which have been posted on the Amazon website.

## Review #1

‘A really good read. The subject matter could have been daunting but it is handled with sensitivity and grace. You soon get caught up in the story and its many facets. Humour, tragedy, pathos, fear and whimsy are all to be found in these pages. I found myself feeling great empathy with the characters, particularly with Graham and his plight. You will care about these people and want to know what happens to them.’

## Review #2

‘A thoroughly enjoyable Trilogy. The characters are true to life, Graham and Nancy in particular. The books are well researched and written and contained all the elements that keep you turning the pages from wit, humor, violence and death. I laughed and cried throughout and I actually miss my morning read now I have finished all three books. Highly recommended and I look forward to any new material in the future from this talented Author.’

## Review #3

‘What a great series of books! The characters in the books are so well developed you feel as though you know them personally. The books are filled with comical incidents as well as the deep sadness that dealing the subject of child abuse automatically brings. It would be great to bring these characters to life as the story-line would make a superb TV series. I look forward to reading any future works by this author.’

## Review #4

‘I have read all three of these books and was hooked after reading the first 10 pages - absolutely enthralling. Although the subject matter can be harrowing it is such an up lifting and positive story which leaves you with a good feeling thanks to the wonderful main character Graham! Well done to the author I will look out for more of his books in the future.’

## Review #5

‘Read this on the kindle because of the write ups and loved the story line. Went on to books 2 & 3 and also bought copies for a friend’s birthday and she enjoyed them just as much well done and something a bit different.’

## **Review #6**

‘This is an incredibly well written story. I was hooked before I finished the first chapter and read the whole thing in days. Such a clever take on a story like this. Recommend to anyone who fancies something a bit different.’

## **Review #7**

‘Top draw, huge intensity with clear visual feel, love the twists and turns, should make a best seller in my view. I produce films and this would make an excellent project.’

## **Review #8**

‘As an avid reader of novels I do tend to stay with certain authors and read all their works before moving on to the next. I have read all three in this trilogy, I don't know where the inspiration came from for this story but ten pages into it and I couldn't put it down. This first book, 'Through A Child's Eye View' left me wanting more and when 'Graham's Gang' came out I wasn't disappointed. When book three 'Help out House' was released I wondered where the Author was going with it, it soon became apparent. The storyline is not without an element of truth so praise to the Author for the lengthy research he must have carried out to write such a feasible story, sometimes amusing, sometimes harrowing and sometimes sad, you've got to be good to bring me close to tears! Sorry I haven't explained what the story is about, that's for you to find out but well done the Author on an outstanding first novel, I can't wait to read your next work.’

## **Review #9**

‘This book is pacey and punchy. The author is an accomplished story teller who juggles the story lines in America and England to keep them all on track to their conclusion. I think I enjoyed this book the most out of the three, perhaps because I had become so involved with the characters and was desperate to find out what happened in the end. The author slightly changes his style again to match this stage in the story and you can see how his confidence has grown as a writer. In this trilogy, he has steered us through the events in the life of these people, tweaking his writing style to give three very different types of books which seamlessly follow on from each other through the characters and their growing relationships and the very strong central story line. Very clever! Highly recommended!’

## About the Author

# Jeff Hawksworth

After thirty years in the insurance industry, latterly as a pensions consultant, Jeff decided to take a gap decade.

His life has been filled with formative influences, such as those imparted by his woodwork teacher, 50 years ago, who gave him a lifelong love of wood and taught him how to work it. You might say Mr Dunkerley was Jeff's *Mr Chips*. (No pun intended).

Not forgetting Pam, his wife of 39 years, his son James and daughter Kim.

More recently, a master carver named Mike Painter taught Jeff how to carve and so wood carving has filled a significant part of the 'Gap', along with coach driving, here and on the continent, (boys toys). Speaking of continent, there is the new found love of France; its culture, food and of course, wine.

Felling trees, cooking and a short but very enjoyable spell as an examinations officer at a local college also helped to fill time but the real surprise was fiction. Writing it that is.

What started as a vivid dream that stayed with him, became a four year journey of discovery that resulted in the publication of Graham's chronicles, *A Child's Eye View*, *Graham's Gang* and *Help Out House*.

Oh, nearly forgot, Jeff is 62 and 8 years into his gap decade. Watch this space.