



A Shaft of Thanks

Reg was everybody's perfect idea of the 'grumpy old man'. He was a man. He was old, from a child's point of view, and he was grumpy, from everyone's point of view. But it all began to change in a moment, when he saw the smile with a missing tooth on a rosy cheeked face set in a bush of curly red hair.

Reg spent most of his days at his allotment. Even the wet days. He had a heater in his shed, an old arm chair and a battery lantern to read by when light was too poor through the barred window. He didn't grow so much on the allotment now. His sister-in-law didn't need the vegetables since Brian, his brother-in-law had taken on a patch nearby. 'Anyhow,' she said. 'I always had to ask him for what I wanted. He'd never think to bring it himself.' Lucy had lost patience with Reg. She had tried all ways she could to help him lift the depression that dropped like a dark cloud over him when his Ruth died. She would be the first to admit that Reg's life had had more than it's fair share of pain, what with losing their two little ones and the years of nursing Ruth to say nothing of the redundancies and unemployment. 'But that's no reason to make everybody else's life a misery,' she had told him when he'd declined her invitation to join them for Christmas dinner. That was two years ago. They had not spoken much since. It did not matter. Reg was still able to manage his affairs for himself.

He did not want to be a 'grumpy old man'. It just seemed to happen slowly and then there was no going back. There were a few times when he remembered himself as a very different person. Perhaps he was still, deep down, but there did not seem much hope of those good old days returning. He had become hard of hearing and was often irritated by having only half a story. As time went on, everything seemed to be wrong; - the Government, the local council, those church folks who used to visit Ruth, the vandalism, the kids with their balls. The world had changed and he could only see things through his critical black cloud. That was until the day a mass of burning auburn curls flashed across his dull horizon.

It had been a warm day and Reg had decided to dig up some of his early new potatoes. There were not many neighbours about to grunt at this afternoon. These days he found he needed to rest between digging each root. The sunshine had brought quite a number of children to play in the park which bounded his land on two sides. 'There'll be more balls coming over the fence,' he mumbled to himself. He had a collection of balls of all sizes at the back of his shed. 'They can come and ask for them if they want them back.'

It was not a ball this time. He heard the voice first. 'Please, can you get my teddy for me.' Reg could not see the voice but he soon spotted the teddy bear, caught up on a cotoneaster he'd grown to 'keep the kids out'. He was about to shout something like, 'It'll have to stay there till I'm ready.' when he saw the little girl standing in a gap in the hedge. He couldn't miss her. The red hair shone like a beacon in the sunshine. 'I'm sorry,' the high pitched little voice said anxiously, 'My brother snatched it from me and threw it up there.'

Reg stuck his fork firmly into the ground, eased his stiff back and slowly walked to the fence. He unhooked the teddy bear and handed it through the fence railings.

'Thank you,' said the little voice. Reg was stunned for a moment. The smile spoke more thanks than the words. Almost a grin, it showed the missing tooth gap to the left of centre and her whole face alight with relief and pleasure. Reg just gazed, then quickly returning to himself said, 'You tell that brother of yours from me not to be so mean.'

'Thank you,' she said again and ran away across the grass to her mother, the teddy held firmly under one arm.

Something stirred in Reg as he took up his fork again. On reflection he would call it a mixture of pleasure, regret and guilt. He dug another couple of potato roots and potted about for a while putting the potatoes in a bag. There were too many for the one bag and he was just about to go to the shed for another, when he heard the little girl's voice again. 'Mister!' Looking up he saw her in the same place - at the gap in the hedge. 'Can you come?' she called. Reg walked slowly to the fence. 'It's for you.' She held out a long chain of daisies. 'I made it for you. To thank you for my teddy.' The child's smile was like an armour-piercing shaft.

Reg hadn't said 'thanks' to anyone for a long time now, but it came naturally and with it even half a smile.

'Put it on,' said the little girl. 'Put it round your neck.' Without further thought Reg did as he was told. 'You look lovely,' she told him and smiled again. Reg would never put into words what he experienced then. It was like a thousand beautiful memories all squeezed into a timeless moment. The little girl laughed and skipped away across the grass.

He returned to the shed to get another bag for the potatoes. Thoughtfully, he hung the daisy chain round the picture of Ruth he kept there. Picking up the bag, he said aloud to himself, 'I suppose I could take some taitties round to Lucy. Brian's aren't ready yet.'