

# Helpful

We never know when fate can turn a chance encounter into a path to riches and greatness. Or just a life's work.

A number of years ago at a high school reunion, a few of us lingered after dinner at the table and spoke of what we'd done in the past thirty years. Richard (I'll call him) told of how he happened into his long career. Richard said it all began when he laughed out loud one day long ago after school at a fellow who was carrying a load of boxes along the sidewalk. It happened in the downtown area of our hometown, a much busier place in those days. The man was trying to move files and attempted to carry too many at once as he walked along the street in his shirtsleeves on a cold November afternoon. File folders spilled out of the boxes onto the sidewalk. He scurried about on his knees picking them up and then stood and walked away with his arms loaded.

"Since he was leaving," said Richard, who was 16 years old at the time, "I felt safe in saying loud enough for him to hear, 'What an idiot!' with a heavy accent on the last word, as only a teenage snot could make it sound."

The man ignored Richard, but another gentleman reached out and clamped a firm hand on his shoulder and spun the teen around to face him.

"You insulted that man," said this large fellow in a black suit under his long grey overcoat.

"He didn't hear me," Richard offered as an excuse, although both knew that was untrue."

"Doesn't matter," Mr. Gray Overcoat said as he stared down at the boy. "You should apologize to him for your words."

"Why?" said Richard. "He's already gone."

"Catch up with him," the man bellowed, raising his fist, "or I'll land a few good punches on you!"

Richard could see he meant it. His breath was coming hard, his jaw was set and his face red. His powerful

large hand continued to grip the teenager's shoulder unrelentingly. Richard was young enough to not be surprised that someone meant to punch his lights out.

At that moment, the man carrying the boxes turned and came back toward the two. Neither knew why he did so. He wasn't looking at them, but as he was about to pass the boy stepped toward him, looked down at the ground and mumbled, "I'm sorry." A set of knuckles began to grind into Richard's back, so he reluctantly continued, "For calling you a name ... sir."

"Uh" was Mr. Shirtsleeves only answer as he barely slowed down while passing by. Without any acknowledgement he carried the boxes back in the direction he had come from.

"That man is earning his living," said Mr. Overcoat. "He probably has a wife and children and he works to support them, as I'm sure someone supports you. You have no right to laugh at him."

"It was funny," Richard whined, "when he dropped the boxes."

"I'll tell you what's funny," said the man, "you are. You loaf along the street doing nothing useful and think you can insult someone who has grown up and taken responsibility for himself and others. You should have helped him pick up his files and not laughed at him."

The man carrying the box of files now turned again and came back in their direction. Richard wondered how he came to get lost carrying boxes on the street in cold weather without a coat on. Wouldn't he have known where he was going before stepping out with only a shirt on, boxes piled in his arms?

As he came up to them again with the files, Mr. Overcoat raised his voice and called to him, "Here! Over here, sir." Mr. Overcoat turned and opened the back door of a gray late model Oldsmobile sedan parked at the curb. "Put them in here," he said to the fellow.

"Oh, are you Mr. Silkworth?" said Shirtsleeves. "I knew you must be out here somewhere!"

"Right here all the while," said Silkworth.

Shirtsleeves' face was full of irritation, instead of the respectful countenance one might have expected.

"Then why the hell didn't you help me pick up the files when I dropped them?" he complained.

Silkworth straightened up to his full height.

"I thought it better," he began, "to spend my time giving a lesson to this young man who laughed at--"

"Terrific!" said Shirtsleeves, meaning anything but that. "I'm dragging my ass around out here with your files and you can't even help?"

Richard said he always felt a kinship with anyone who attempted to mentor him, so maybe that's why he mounted a defense of Mr. Silkworth.

"This man was kind enough," the teen said, "to interrupt his standing around waiting for you to lecture me on being of help!" Richard managed the little speech with quite an air of authority ... for a kid.

Shirtsleeves threw the file boxes in the back of the Oldsmobile and turned to Silkworth and Richard.

"I don't think I've ever met two more self satisfied and useless people in my entire life," he said. With that, he turned and left..

I laughed, in my mind's eye seeing Richard no doubt left with a very angry Mr. Silkworth, who had only moments before threatened to slug him.

"Richard," I said, "He must have been fuming. I would have gotten away as fast as I could run!"

"Oh,no." said Richard. "As a teenager nearing the end of a career in the company of other school boys, I was used to being insulted. But I felt bad for Mr. Silkworth. His face had reddened again as he stood crestfallen in the street next to his Oldsmobile.

"It just goes to show you," Richard said to Mr. Silkworth.

"Shows me what?" the man asked.

"Helpful people like us are seldom appreciated," said the teen.

The big man remained silent.

"Yes," Richard opined, "this has been quite a lesson for me."

Mr. Silkworth had a doubtful look upon his face.

"Are you being sarcastic?" he asked.

"Maybe," said Richard. "I think it would be appropriate."

Mr. Silkworth dug deep into his grey overcoat pocket. He pulled out a business card and handed it to the teenager.

"Stop by my office when you graduate," he said.

The Richard of today leaned back from the dinner table and laughed.

"That was the only job interview I've ever had," said my classmate. "I've been doing Silkworth and Company's public relations work now for thirty years."

Richard's cell phone chimed in his jacket pocket and he pulled it out without even trying to appear apologetic. He didn't get up and leave so that his conversation would be private, but instead reached out and put his hand on my arm to indicate we were not finished.

"Thanks, Lloyd," he said into his super-modern widget-infested cell phone. "Have fun. Yes, I'm at the reunion."

He slid the phone back into his pocket and said, "That was Lloyd, the fellow running around in his shirtsleeves looking for Silkworth. He just called to say he'd landed safely in Florida."

"You still see him?" I said.

"I married his daughter, " said Richard. She was working after school at his accounting business when I dropped in to make a real apology."

"Did Lloyd and Mr. Silkworth ever make up?" I asked.

"Hah!" laughed, Richard. "That's what I was going to tell you. They were brothers; looking for each other on the street when I happened by and opened my big mouth. That's when Uncle Harry Silkworth decided teach me a lesson and Lloyd went along with it."

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