

# PRANK

## Practicing Random Acts of <sup>a</sup>Nonymous Kindness

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How often have you felt that somebody has done you a big favour that has cost them time, trouble, effort and money, and who deserves some token of your appreciation or gratitude, but you know that to give money would cause offence? Or perhaps there is someone that you know about who is finding things hard and clearly needs some help, but would feel offended by a monetary gift.

The original PRANK is surely to be found in the legend of St. Nicholas, the origin of the Santa Claus myth, who is said to have discovered that a family was suffering great hardship and was about to sell their eldest daughter into slavery to pay the bills and put food on the table for the rest of the family. The family found that a bag of money had been put through their door on the very day that the girl was due to be taken to the slave-dealer. It is said that this happened three times over a number of years, and that all three daughters were thereby saved from this fate.

I remember the story my father used to tell about driving towards his first locum tenens job after graduating in Medicine.

*I graduated from Aberdeen University in 1923 and then registered as a doctor in 1924 after a pre-registration year in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. My first job after registration was as a locum tenens in Wick in the far north of Scotland. I had purchased a car, an already ancient boat-backed Citroën, with the income that I had received during my pre-registration year. Its wire wheels had knock-off hubs that all had right-hand threads, so the right-hand hubs had a tendency to loosen and sometimes come off as you drove along. The driver knew nothing about this until the wheel itself came off a short time later. It is a strangely surreal experience to watch ones wheel slowly overtaking the car as the axle grates along the road surface bringing the car slewing and graunching to a halt. I had to run ahead to catch the wheel before it disappeared into a river and then I had to walk back the way I had come for several hundred yards to try to find the hub nut, which would bounce a good way off the path into the undergrowth.*

*Petrol stations were few and far between in those days and I always kept spare fuel on board; the car was provided with a built-in fuel can strapped to the running-board. I had travelled up from London where I had purchased the car, followed the Great North Road to Edinburgh. Then I travelled via Stirling, Perth and Dundee to Aberdeen, where I stayed where I stayed a couple of nights to visit friends from University, and was taking a cross-country route towards Inverness. I had already used my spare can of fuel, and had been on the lookout for signs of a petrol station for the past hour, but the engine missed a beat, struggled for a moment and then pattered to a stop. Around me was dense forest; ahead the road stretched on, disappearing into the distance. Unnecessarily, I opened the filler on the petrol tank in vain hope that there was something in it, but it was clearly empty. I unstrapped the fuel can and prepared to walk a goodly distance to the next town when a diminutive man with a long white beard appeared, stepping out from the thick forest. He was dressed in well-worn heather-mixture tweed: jacket, waist-coat, plus-fours and a droopy deer-stalker.*

*In a slow gentle Highland accent he asked me if he could help me.*

*"I've run out of petrol," I said, "do you know how far it is to the nearest petrol station?"*

*"Chest you wait there," he said, and disappeared the way he had come.*

*After five minutes or so I wondered if I was just wasting my time or had imagined this apparition and was about to start walking again, when he reappeared with a big tin can and set about emptying it into the fuel tank of the car.*

*"That should be enough to get you to Inverness where you will find petrol," he said.*

*I tried to pay him, but he refused all payment with a smile, saying: "One time, long ago, a man helped me when I was in sair need. I wanted to repay him but I did not then have the means. He told me not to try to repay him, but, when I was able, to do a kindness for another needy person. Ever since then, when I have found another person in need, I have done what he asked. I chest ask that you can find it in yourself to do the same." And he disappeared into the forest whence he came.*

*As I have travelled along the road of life, I have tried, when I could, to repay my debt of gratitude to him by helping others, following this rather curious logic. Each time I have done so, I have retold this story and asked the person to carry forward the debt and to help others in return. I have made many good friends this way. I believe that the world would be a far better place if everybody did this.*

Here is an example from my own experience. A British Girl Guide of about twelve spent a week at an international Guide camp. There she met up with some French Guides, all over 16, none of whom spoke much English, some none at all. Although she had no knowledge of French, she managed in those few days to establish a friendly, lively and enthusiastic communication with them. Three weeks later, she started secondary school. The first year pupils were arbitrarily divided into two groups, half to be taught French, the rest German. This young Girl Guide was put into the German group, and was, understandably, too timid to ask to change. A couple of days later an anonymous letter reached the school telling of the girl's experience communicating with French Guides at the International camp and suggesting that she be taken aside and be given a chance to opt to learn French. She did, and now, forty-five years later, continues to visit and correspond with several of those French Guides and has a career providing simultaneous translations at high-level international conferences and meetings. She still does not know who wrote that letter.

If you are in a dilemma about how to repay someone or to help them without causing offence, just do it anonymously. If you need to say something, call it a "PRANK: Practicing Random Acts of <sup>a</sup>Nonymous Kindness."