



SOUNDS AND SIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS GIVING by Nancy Cramer

Ting-a-ling-ling went the faint sound of my Salvation Army bell with clapper- removed as I wore my red apron for the fourth year at a major shopping center. I was lucky. I was inside where it was warm with lots of shoppers and business folks walking in great hordes in front of me. "Good morning," or "Hello, how are you?" got the attention of most. They turned to give me a response and a smile.

Each year I have a different experience while ringing my bell. Some years it was the loving grandparents who bent over their little ones, pressing coins or a dollar bill into the tiny hands. Then lifting the toddler up to reach my kettle, which I tilted down on purpose. Other years it was the generosity of smartly dressed men or women. The economy was good and they responded accordingly. One year I noted the donations of people who were down on their luck, economy bad with high numbers of jobless people, who still dropped a coin or two to clink in the red bucket.

My first donation this time was a \$5.00 bill pushed into the slot by a shy teenage girl. She was with friends, I suppose, although she looked like she didn't quite fit in. But she generously parted with that bill. Her smile was beautiful as if it were her soul was peeking through. I thanked her and was rewarded with another smile. The next one was a nicely dressed man who took out a slim wallet and retrieved an even slimmer bill. "Thank you, and Merry Christmas," I responded. He got the same from me regardless.

Next were the wrestling tournament teams wearing team jackets and shorts. Cool weather outside, and they were "cool" talking to me. "Nervous about the matches?" I asked. Confidently, the reply. "not a bit, this is my third time at state. I've won twice before." Another school team spoke differently, perhaps more honestly. Who knows with teens? "Well, just a little bit. He's had to drop 12 pounds to make his weight class." I thought back to many years ago when my son had the same predicament.

Next came the giggling girls, or "team managers," I learned. "You keep the boys in line?" I asked. Nice girls, they replied politely to me, probably having heard the same question a dozen times. But coming from small towns, perhaps they knew to be respectful to gray hair ladies waving the Salvation Army bell. Some even dug into their jacket pockets and came up with coins, bobby pins and buttons. The latter two they kept before dumping the less valuable items, the coins, into the bucket.

This year I was fascinated by the appearances of people, young and old. As I spoke to them, I studied their smiles, and I studied their clothes, especially the shoes. Girls in fashionable tall furry or leather boots, women wobbling in stiletto heels, teens in neon colored tennis. Oh, here come a group of business men, all in black suits with two side pleats in the back of the jacket. All with ties designed with red, lots of it, spots of it, stripes. Now, here's a pleaser. A lime green shirt with dashing lavender tie. Not bad. Wonder what the rest of the mob think of this fellow.



Spike heels, tight short skirts, the women always had half of their garments in black. The other half is the female response to red ties: bright shiny blouses or skirts and tight sweaters on stylishly slim bodies. Here come the black birds again, en masse. Must have been a company meeting somewhere. Ut oh, one man with a stomach wearing a light sports jacket. He's either the head of the company or the lowest one on the totem pole. Now here again strides briskly the pink shirt executive, undoubtedly from the shopping mall. He's been back and forth all morning always with a different underling.

Thus I entertained myself through my three hour shift, it was supposed to be only two. There was a real shortage of volunteers this year. Yes, even for this warm spot where a fascinating parade of human kind marched before me. While not everyone donated, some apologetically said, "I gave at the other bucket downstairs," no one ignored the faint call of the bell. They mostly said, "Merry Christmas to you," or "Have a good day," or "How are you?"

Does that mean we are finally turning the corner on being more civil to each other, or has the Christmas spirit percolated through their concerns and problems. No matter. I came away, my heart lighter, my hope for civility a bit higher. This may not last, but that's okay. It happened, and I am richer for it. Perhaps some of my passersby are richer also.

Ting-a-ling-ling.

Written in December, 2014 or 2015