

TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 145.



Christmas has come, but not gone. The decorations and the tree lights still adorn our windows and shopping centres. It is still over a week before Santa arrives on the beaches of some countries. It is a time to be nice, to check on a neighbour, to say hello to the old person walking down the street, as they may live on their own, with thoughts of friends no longer with them. In Scotland, we party through Christmas, into the New Year. Decorations are hung, trees erected and lit up, Church services and parties are held. Like Christmas, New Year was to be a new beginning, a new start. Your house was cleaned from top to bottom, windows, sprayed with cleaner and rubbed down with old newspapers, carpets taken outside and beaten with a stick. Messages were sent up chimneys, stockings filled and presents exchanged. Then on to Hogmanay (New Years Eve), after everything was ready for the bells, and your first foot (the first person to come to your door after midnight), you had to shower or bath, put your clothes in the washing, and put on your best ones, ready for your fresh start.

So, it was in the Parsonage household, with the added work of ensuring there was no rainwater in the lifeboats and that any snow had been cleared away from the route between the house and the boats. We were always having to take into account the Scottish weather which could be floods, ice, wind etc. We were, now, sitting around the fireside, awaiting the bells when the other bell rang, the doorbell. "Bennie, there's a woman on the outside of the bridge". Bennie, in his new year finery, sprinted out the door with me not far behind him, while one of the three girls, (Mother Elizabeth or Ann) phoned for Police and Ambulance, another ran upstairs to the hall window to inform on what was happening, and the third rushed to boil water, and ensure a bed and medical treatment was all to hand, as it always was, but still better checking. To this day, our tap water is kept almost boiling, just in case.



Meanwhile Ben had vaulted over the fencing and was into his boat, which lay topside of the barge, pointing bow out into the river for a speedy getaway. I was shouted to stand by in case another boat was required. A rope lifted off his rowlock and Bennie shot out into the current just as the woman let go of her hold on the outside girders, and fell down into the freezing cold water. With his usual expertise, Bennie swung his boat round beside the woman, grabbed hold of her and in a one, lifted her over the gunnel into the boat. Landing at the wharf, we lifted the woman and conveyed her to the house. Mother took over, removing the wet clothes from the nice old lady, who was now, laid on the rubber bed, dried her, then, with Elizabeth and Ann helping, rolled her over onto the next bed, that had sheets and blankets, including a pig (a type of hot water bottle) to heat her up.



Police and an Ambulance arrived, and the medics took over. The old woman kept apologising. She had spent Christmas on her own, and did not wish to also spend the New Year on her own. She had been totally confident that Bennie would rescue her (she was right) and she would spend the first few days of the New Year in a nice warm hospital, with friendly people.

As this lady was helped out into the waiting Ambulance, the bells on the Tron Steeple, stopped playing their Scottish tunes and started chiming midnight; it was New Year. The old woman was hugged by Parsonages, Police and Ambulance personnel, hands were shaken and good wishes for the future exchanged.

Be nice, say hello, ensure your neighbours are OK, visit lonely people, invite them to share your hospitality.

Bennie always said that opportunity only come to those who are ready, and he, I am proud to say, was always ready.

Bring some “Joy to the World” as the carol says.
May 2024 be a good year for you and yours.