

Liz Smith



Charity the best gift

WHAT'S in every contract. That's what they call a sanity clause," says Groucho.

"You can't fool me. There ain't no Sanity Claus!" says Chico.

IN THESE days leading up to Christmas, you may be surprised to hear that I — me, myself and I — have saved several animals from destruction, including a few rare birds, fed the hungry all over the world, sent meals to the homebound, rescued a city monument, provided for the relief of children here and there, contributed to world peace, battled cancer, planted a grove of trees in a national forest and played Robin Hood.

These are just a few of the charitable gifts I received from the rich and famous and even a few unknowns; beautiful Christmas cards saying "a donation has been made in your name." Though I didn't have to lift a finger, I am glad so many good results came out of the spirit of giving. Thanks to the movie producers, tycoons of business, editors, publishers, agents, managers and stars who made these acts of charity possible in my name.

I was delighted not to be buried under cookies!

SEE that our favorite baton lifter, **Bob Hardwick**, has been tapped by the Illinois presidential inaugural folks to lead the main orchestra when President **Obama** begins his waltz at Washington's Renaissance Hotel. This will make the sixth US president for whom Hardwick and his merry men have played.

I'd say congratulations are in order for Bob. He is a guy who left banking and went into making people happy with his multi-style dance music. (If only more people had left banking. Or, if only the honest ones had stayed in.)

WANT a last-minute gift for the person who is perhaps a deserving "wannabe"? Drop by your bookstore and get the genius artist-writer **Edward Sorel's** new one "The Mural at the Waverly." This discusses the fabulous wall paintings Sorel has done for **Graydon Carter's** smash hit restaurant in Greenwich Village.

You can also buy Sorel's caricatures of Americana (Uncle Sam and others) at the Metropolitan Museum. He is in a class by himself.

CAROLINES on B'way, the comedy club, sends good wishes and tells us that Air Force One will now be known as "The Soul Plane" ... that **Lindsay Lohan** admits she is not a thespian ... that **Tina Fey** deserves a Cabinet appointment ... and suggests ego-bypass surgery for **Kanye West**.

Carolines also wishes for more gold parachutes that "don't open" and suggests

the most precious gift of all is — laughter.

SNOW? Snow in New Orleans recently, and then the biggest snowfall in 30 years in Las Vegas! What is this old world coming to? While the eccentricity of it may make us smile, there is no joy in Mudville over the "fun" films Hollywood has sent us lately.

This December, we've seen a slew of the most depressing movies of all time. Yes, many of them are totally brilliant and important. But even in a big sprawling unique drama like "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," I found myself sobbing at the end and couldn't get some of the sadder aspects out of my psyche for days.

In the 1930s Great Depression, they were making movies that made folks feel good in spite of their circumstances. Take "My Man Godfrey" for instance or "It Happened One Night." But now ... ?

Consider the biggies released to be eligible for the Academy Awards: **Will Smith's** "Seven Pounds," described as both "gruesome" and "relentlessly depressing." This from a great comic star! It's all about the quandary of suicide.

Then there's "Revolutionary Road," which goes into marital angst in the '50s. You may never take on a serious relationship again after seeing this one with **Leonardo DiCaprio** and **Kate Winslet**.

How about "The Reader," which features an illiterate woman who seduces a teenager and goes on trial for war crimes in the aftermath of Hitler's Germany? Really a fine film, but not an upper. Plus, "Doubt" — Catholic moralizing, guilt and fine acting to the nth degree.

Of course, there is **Tom Cruise** and his historical "Valkyrie," a true story about a failed plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. And though they are pushing this as a James Bond thriller, it's still depressing history. There's an exception in the thriller category. I mean "Frost/Nixon," which is dynamite and full of suspense and grand actors. Meanwhile, your kids have gone wild for vampire love in "Twilight." At least the depressions here are from sexy fangs.

We do have the obvious probable Oscar winner in "Slumdog Millionaire," which everybody seems to adore. There's also "Milk," which won critical raves for **Sean Penn** as the San Francisco politico who changed gay history. This one is termed "uplifting." Mr. Milk dies, however.

There's a charming little romance movie in "Last Chance Harry" with **Dustin Hoffman** and **Emma Thompson**. But it's a mighty slim romantic comedy about two losers in London who end up happy, and I didn't find the story quality to be aces.