

# II

# Christmas in America

## THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP

by Harry Hansen

CHRISTMAS in Chicago, fifty years ago, was a happy, home festival in a city not yet too rich, too pretentious, to be neighborly. There was usually snow at Christmas; it lay in large heaps in the gutters and was packed solid on the streets. When snow fell it was heavy with moisture; it blocked trains and held up streetcars. The average citizen shoveled his own sidewalks clean and looked after his own fires. A few blocks beyond the Loop, where the gray wooden cottages with their scrollwork porches stretched for miles, householders would be out early in the mornings wielding their shovels, amid shouts to their neighbors, for in those days families lived long enough in one locality to become known to one another.

In the houses on the near North Side, where brick buildings abounded, the windows had little wooden blinds inside through which came the yellow rays of light from gas jets. The air in the streets outside had the close feeling of a low-ceilinged room and shouts rebounded from wall to wall. In that air bells on sleighs jingled in time a long way off and hoofbeats made a dull patter on the packed snow. As the sleigh

passed under the light of the gas lamp at the corner you could see the prancing horse, the curved dashboard, the gleam of the nicked bars across the front, the flash of the runners. The driver would be wearing a wide fur collar and a fur cap; the woman beside him would be tucked under fur robes and look very comfortable in a brown fur neckpiece and toque.

Inside, the house was warm and a bit stuffy with dry air. The carpets had a firm surface and gay curlicues of vine leaves all over them. The hall might be dark; its walls were covered with embossed paper, stained to the color of leather, and the gaslight flickered behind a globe of pink glass ornamented with a trailing vine. You walked quickly past the parlor, which had a mantelpiece of black slate and a mirror over the fireplace and heavy chairs and settees with curved walnut legs, to the back room where all the family gathered. Here the walls were hung with photographs of young and old and there were music racks and bookshelves. If the house was heated by a furnace, the hot air flooded up through a register in the floor, but more likely a big-bellied stove, consuming

anthracite coal, gleamed red through mica windows in a corner. And in the bay stood the Christmas tree.

Most likely the father of the family had picked it out and carried it home. Men and women carried their own bundles in those days. Perhaps he walked down to the Clark Street bridge, a week or two before Christmas, to see if the Schuenemanns had come down from Wisconsin with a load of spruce trees. Invariably the two big, brawny lads would be there with a fishing schooner loaded with trees that they themselves had cut in the Michigan woods. They were fine, well-shaped trees and cost so little—for 75 cents you bought a full-sized tree; for \$1 you had your choice of the best. Even saplings provided bright decorations for a city where people were making money, but not too much money, and where the average citizen was always fearful of hard times.

As long ago as 1887 the two Schuenemanns, Herman and August, had sailed down in a schooner from Manistique, Michigan, with a load of spruce and tied up beside the dock behind the old red-brick commission houses at the Clark Street bridge. There Chicago found them and bought their stock, and called Herman captain and remembered to look for him the following year. When snow fell on Chicago's streets in December days, the father of the family would say, "Guess I'll have to go down to the Clark Street bridge to see if the captain is in and get us a tree."

Fifty years ago the work of providing trees for Christmas was not yet the mass-production business it has become in recent times. No dealer contracted for thousands of trees as a speculation and destroyed great numbers if he had guessed wrong on the demand. No man cut down whole hillsides to satisfy the whims of people who followed a custom but didn't know how to pray. There were plenty of trees for all. The Schuenemanns went into the woods behind Manistique and Thompson, Michigan, where young trees grew on land that had been cut over to make the lumber that went into midwestern houses a generation before. They chose the trees carefully, including some tall

ones for which they had orders from churches and hotels. Sometimes they had to work in the snow and when the trees reached Chicago there was still snow on the branches. The brothers thought they had done well when they made a modest profit on a trip that occupied about six weeks of the wintry season, when it was hard to haul other cargoes.

The work was not easy, neither the cutting nor the sailing, for they always came when Lake Michigan kicked up a lot of rough sea. In 1898 August had just set sail with a load of trees when a storm arose and he and his ship were lost. Thereupon Herman determined to carry on alone. In 1899 he was back at the Clark Street dock with his boat, the *Rouse Simmons*, loaded with Christmas trees. He was a jovial man, with a very ruddy complexion and laughing wrinkles around his blue eyes, and everybody liked him.

For eleven years Herman arrived with his cargo and many people depended on him for a tree year after year. Then came the hard season of 1912, with storms and heavy seas on Lake Michigan. Late in November Herman cut his trees in the woods behind Manistique and started for Chicago in the *Rouse Simmons*, with a crew of seventeen men. There were head winds and heavy seas from the start and soon the schooner was struggling in a raging snow-storm. What took place on board we can only guess. The *Rouse Simmons* sailed into the silence that covers all the fine ships that have fallen victim to the gales of Lake Michigan, which have taken the lives of so many, from the days of La Salle's *Griffon* until now.

Long before Chicago missed the *Rouse Simmons* at its dock, reports began to come of the ship's distress. A schooner resembling it was said to have been sighted off Kewaunee, Wisconsin, flying distress signals. The steamer *George W. Orr* reported to the revenue cutter *Tuscarora* that she had seen the *Rouse Simmons* three miles offshore, but the captain later admitted that he might have been mistaken. But on December 5, 1912, fishermen off Two Rivers Point, seven miles north of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, found the tops of spruce trees en-

tangled in their nets. Trees had been roped together on the deck of the *Rouse Simmons*, and how could they get into the lake at that point if not off a ship?

On December 13th a watcher on the beach at Sheboygan, Wisconsin, reported that he had picked up a bottle containing a message that came from the captain. It had been written on a page of the ship's log, and read:

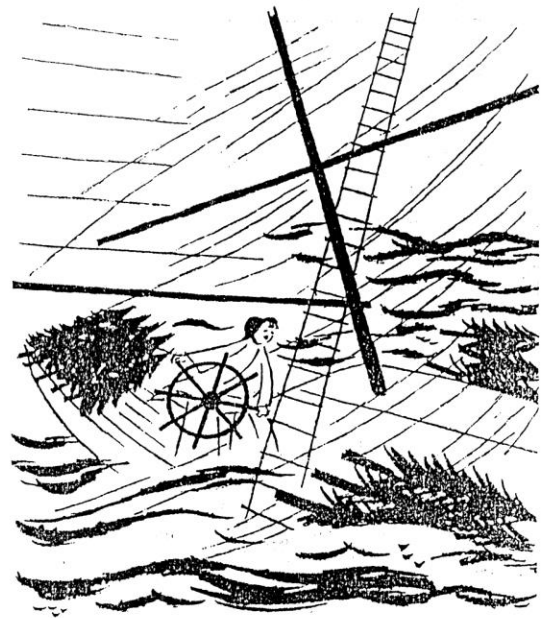
Friday — Everybody goodbye. I guess we are all through. Sea washed over our deckload Thursday. During the night the small boat was washed over. Leaking bad. Ingvald and Steve fell overboard Thursday. God help us.

HERMAN SCHUENEMANN

The men referred to were believed to have been Steve E. Nelson, mate, and Ingvald Ny-lons, seaman. But if there was such a message, it never reached the captain's wife, who was eagerly waiting for scraps of news in her Manistique home. She was a valiant little woman, with a great deal of stamina. When she realized that her three little girls, Elsie and the twins, Pearl and Hazel, were now dependent wholly on her efforts, she resolved to take up her husband's task.

There was no Christmas ship at the Clark Street dock in 1912. But when 1913 came, Chicago residents who looked over the railings of the bridge beheld another schooner, loaded with trees, as in the days when Captain Herman held forth there. On board was the plucky little wife of the captain. She had gone into the woods with the woodcutters and supervised the felling of the trees. With her, too, were her girls, as well as women to weave wreaths and garlands. Chicago was to become well acquainted with the Schuenemanns. They were to come season after season for twenty-two years after the *Rouse Simmons* went down.

For years Chicago friends would ask the captain's wife whether there had been any definite report on the *Rouse Simmons*, and she could only shake her head sorrowfully. Yet the sea, which guards its secrets well, reluctantly gave up tangible evidence fourteen years after the



disaster. On April 23, 1924, the wallet of Captain Schuenemann was found at Two Rivers Point, where the spruce trees had been tangled in the fishermen's nets. It still had the original rubber band around it and the cards and clippings inside seemed to be made of plaster. Some of the clippings related to earlier voyages of the Christmas tree ship. Three years after this find, a bottle with a note signed by Charles Nelson was picked up. It read:

These lines were written at 10:30 P.M. Schooner R. S. ready to go down about 20 miles southeast Two Rivers Point between fifteen or twenty miles off shore. All hands lashed to one line. Goodbye.

Eventually the family made its last voyage to the Chicago market with Christmas trees. The mother had grown gray; the girls were handsome young women. Forty-seven years had elapsed since Herman, as an 18-year-old lad, had steered his first cargo into Chicago. The ship had become an institution.

Its fame grew. Today when the winds blow hard on the lake and the heavy surf pounds

the frozen shore line watchers in the lighthouse recall the *Rouse Simmons*. Long ago it inspired a ballad. When word of its loss reached Chicago newspapers, Vincent Starrett, bibliophile and author of many books of fiction and belles-lettres, was a reporter on the *Daily News*. His editor was Henry Justin Smith. "It would make a fine ballad," said Starrett. "Why don't you write it?" replied Smith. So Starrett composed "The Ballad of the Christmas Ship," a poem of many, many quatrains, and Smith found room for it among the crowded columns of the day's news. It may never challenge the efforts of youthful orators as often as "The Wreck of the Hesperus," but the legend is just as moving and the intentions of the poet were as good as Longfellow's.

### THE NIGHT WE TALKED TO SANTA CLAUS

by Lynne Lofting

During the First World War my brother Colin and I lived with my mother in the Catskill Mountains. Our house was perched on a raised plateau, surrounded by apple trees and commanding a beautiful view of the valley and the range of mountains opposite. My mother was not with us very much; she joined the Red Cross and went overseas so that she could be near my father, who was a captain in the Irish Guards. It was at this time that we received the many illustrated letters from him about a kind, little round-faced doctor who could understand and speak to animals—letters that later became the first *Doctor Dolittle* book. The doctor and his animal friends were drawn on any old scraps of paper while my father was actually in the trenches.

I remembered my father only dimly. One evening he had carried me through the garden, perched on his shoulders, and had shown me the faint speck of light that was the evening star. He told me that it was "our" star and that

wherever he was when he left us, he would be looking at it and thinking of us at home.

Wars are remote to children. The months slipped past in our mountain retreat and suddenly it was just before Christmas. Our English Nanny appeared to be strangely excited. It seemed that soon, perhaps even in time for the holidays, Father and Mother would be home.

Happily forgotten in the excitement, my brother and I spent long hours in our nursery, curled up on the window seat, speculating on what we wanted most for Christmas. He was four years old and longed desperately for a real toolbox. My heart was set on a coral ring. We described these to each other in such minute detail that we had almost conjured them up before our eyes.

I can still smell the gingerbread cookies baking downstairs and taste the tang of cold air as it came in our window, blowing the curtains back suddenly to reveal the sky alive with stars. In this hushed, waiting atmosphere we stopped fighting with each other, no longer played tricks on Nanny, and became model children.

At last it was Christmas Eve. But no one had arrived and the house was oddly empty and unpromising. After supper we were allowed downstairs just long enough to hang up our stockings by the fireplace. It wasn't very gay with only ourselves and Nanny there to celebrate. Disappointed and forlorn, we dragged our feet back up the stairs, getting little staccato prods in the back as Nanny hurried us up. She tucked us in and opened the window wide; she was one who believed in plenty of good fresh air. Then she came over and gave a kiss and a hug to each of us.

"Be good children and sleep tight," she said as she left the room.

The faint smell of cookies still floated about in the hall as she opened the door to leave us, but aside from that it might have been any ordinary winter night.

For a while we stayed perfectly still, each thinking his own thoughts. Soon I was sure my brother had fallen asleep. I lay looking at the sky, where a moon the color of tin was sus-