

*Saint Nick and Old Nick would seem to be an odd combination—but a man who wants there to be a Santa Claus just for him has clearly got to have unusual help in achieving his ends. Alternatively, of course, he might settle for less succulent ends....*

# SANTA CLAUSE

by Robert F. Young

"STATE YOUR BUSINESS," THE Adversary said, when the smoke had cleared away. "I haven't got all night!"

Ross swallowed. He hadn't really thought the pentagram would work. He debated on whether to stand up in the Inimical Presence, or to go on sitting behind his desk. He decided on the latter procedure: the Adversary, he was sure, wouldn't be in the least impressed by protocol.

"Well?"

Ross swallowed again. "I — I want there to be a Santa Claus."

"I see.... For everyone, or just for yourself?"

"Just for myself, naturally," Ross said. "I wouldn't stand to gain a thing if everyone cashed in on the deal. Why, there'd be inflation as sure as Ford made green Edsels."

"You've got a point there." The Adversary scratched the back of his neck reflectively with the tip of his tail. "And I must say, your request is original. No one ever thought about *that* angle before. ... There are considerations, of course."

"I expected there would be," Ross said.

"Don't be in such a hurry to show off your cynicism. By 'considerations' I mean that I can't subdivide childhood fantasy. If you want there to be a Santa Claus, you'll have to take everything that goes with him—and live by the rules."

An octet of reindeer pulling a red sleigh pranced through Ross's head. Imagination wasn't one of his strong points. "Sounds all right to me," he said.

"Fine!" The Adversary pulled a mimeographed contract from beneath his robe, punctured a vein in his wrist, and filled in the pertinent blank spaces. He handed it to Ross. "You'll find the terms generous, I think."

"I doubt it," Ross said, running his eyes down the page, paying particular attention to the fine print. Abruptly he gasped. "What's this here? For *life*?"

"That's right. I'm waiving the time limit in this case. Better sign before I change my mind."

Ross took the pen, punctured one of his own wrist veins, and dashed off his name. "But why?" he asked.

The Adversary leered. "You'll find out," he said. There was the usual puff of smoke, the usual odor of brimstone, followed by the usual empty space....

Ross had fun writing his letter to Santa Claus that year. He came right to the point. *Dear Santa*, he wrote: *Please send me a 1959 Cadillac de Ville, a beautiful 40-24-40 Mansfield, 52 cases of top shelf liquor, 365 cases of Schlitz, a year's subscription to Whisper—*

The list was quite imposing, and he didn't really think he'd get *all* he'd asked for; but even if he only got the first three items, he felt that his afterlife would have been invested profitably.

Santa, however, came through with everything. On Christmas morn, Ross found himself the possessor of—in addition to the afore-mentioned items — a completely stocked deepfreeze; a solid chrome refrigerator; 3 gin mills; a Buick-red living room suite; a terra cotta bedroom suite; the complete works of the Marquis de Sade; a 24" blond TV console; a *Sputnik* wall clock with a little dog that popped out every hour and barked what time it was; an electric organ, together with a book entitled, *You*

*Too Can Play The Organ—In Six Easy Lessons!*; a chrome bathroom ensemble; a uranium mine; a large economy-size Laurence Welk record album; 365 Brooks Brothers shirts; a woodworker's do-it-yourself kit; a south sea island; a deluxe edition of the current best-seller, *What's in it for Me?*; 6 gross of Miltowns; an electric train; a *Sputnik* cigarette lighter that went *beep beep!* when you flicked it; a chalet in the Swiss Alps; and a solid gold bottle opener.

The Cadillac did wonders for his ego. For the first time in his life, he felt like a whole man. As for the Mansfield, whose name was Candace, he took one look at her and proposed, she was that irresistible. She said yes, of course—he'd specified in a P.S. that she should fall in love with him at first sight—and that very afternoon they were married by an out-of-state justice of the peace.

Back in the apartment, Ross took his Christmas present in his arms. This, he thought, kissing her, was worth all the empty Christmas stockings he'd ever gotten up to. And it was only the *first* Santa Claus Christmas. The thought of all the things he could ask for on the forthcoming ones made his head swim, and he made a mental note to start work on his next list early, so that he'd be less liable to forget anything.

Presently Candy drew away. "Good night, darling," she said.

"I'll 'good night' you!" Ross said, grabbing her and kissing her again.

She responded as a good blonde should—up to a point. When he passed that point, she disengaged herself and headed for the bedroom. Ross followed. She paused in the doorway. "Good night, darling," she said again, and closed the door in his face. There was a tantalizing little click as the lock slipped into position.

Ross stared disbelievingly at the pink panels. Then he started pounding on them. When Candy opened the door a crack, he roared: "What in hell's the matter with you? This is our *wedding* night!"

"I know it is, darling. Haven't I let you kiss me twice already?"

"Sure you let me kiss you twice. What of it? I didn't marry you just so I could kiss you!"

She gasped at him. "Then why on earth *did* you marry me?"

Before he had a chance to answer he found himself confronted by the pink panels again. He resumed pounding, but this time he got no response. After a while his hands started to hurt, and he desisted.

He went over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself four fingers of I. W. Harper's. He gulped them down, poured four more. He gulped them down, too. Suddenly he became aware that someone—or something—was tapping on the window. He stepped across the room and threw up the sash. A small, pale man was sitting in a bo's'n's seat, just beyond the sill. He had a silver pail in one hand and a putty knife in the other.

"This is a hell of a time for maintenance!" Ross said. "Just what is it you're doing, anyway?"

"Why I'm putting frost on your window, of course," the pale man said. "What did you think I'd be doing on a cold night like this?"

For a moment Ross couldn't speak, he was so furious. Then: "What's your name?" he demanded. "I'm going to report you to the management!"

"The management, ha ha," the pale man said. "The management ha ha!"

"I'll 'ha ha' you if you don't tell me your name!"

"Why I'm Jack Frost, you idiot. Who else would be putting frost on your window?"

Ross stared. "Jack *Frost!*"

The pale man nodded. "Himself."

"For Pete's sake, d'you think I'm a kid? There's no such person as Jack Frost."

"Isn't there, now. First thing you know, you'll be telling me there's no such person as Santa Claus!"

Ross slammed the window shut. He returned to the liquor cabinet and poured himself four more fingers of I. W., then he went over and sat sullenly on the sofa.

He tried to think. What was it the Adversary had said? That he couldn't subdivide childhood fantasy? That in order to make Santa Claus real, he had to make everything that went with Santa Claus real, too?

Jack Frost?

Well why not? Wasn't Jack Frost an integral part of childhood fantasy?

Nonsense, Ross thought. I'll be damned if I'll believe it!

He tossed off his drink and threw the empty glass into the fireplace. He stared glumly at the bedroom door. Suddenly he had a feeling that there was someone standing behind him, and he turned angrily. Sure enough, there *was* someone—a tall, lanky individual wearing a white cowboy suit, armed with a set of silver six-guns, and carrying a golden guitar. A halo, like a circular fluorescent tube, scintillated over his sombrero, a chrome star, with the letters "G.A." stamped on it, glittered on his breast, and a pair of pink wings sprouted from his shoulders.

Ross sighed. "All right," he said wearily. "Who are you?"

The winged cowboy struck a throbbing golden chord. "I'm your G. A.," he drawled.

"My *what*?"

"Your Guardian Angel."

"Whoever heard of a Guardian Angel wearing a cowboy suit and carrying a guitar!"

"Got to keep up with the times, podner. I'd look a mite silly, wouldn't I, wearin' a white robe and carryin' a harp?"

Ross almost said that he looked a mite silly, anyway. But he didn't. For some reason he didn't feel much like talking. He looked around the room a little desperately, noticed that there were still a few fingers remaining in the I. W. bottle. After chug-a-lugging them, he returned foggily to the sofa and lay down. The G. A. got blankets from somewhere and tucked him in for the night.

After a while the Sandman came in, carrying a little red pail, and threw sand in his eyes.

After a week of dead-end kisses and arguments that got him nowhere, of nightly visits by Jack Frost and the Sandman, Ross was ready to tie on a good one. The season was appropriate, and New Year's Eve found him, Candy, and the G. A. ensconced in a dim corner of one of the gin mills Santa had brought him.

Candy, as might have been expected, drank like a bird. Ross was disgusted. Next time he put a Mansfield on his Christmas list, he told himself bitterly, he'd be sure to specify what *kind* of a Mansfield. If the old boy in the red flannel suit didn't understand the facts of life, it was high time he learned.

It was a wretched evening—from Ross's point of view. Candy, though, seemed to enjoy herself—in a milktoast kind of way—and the G. A. had a ball. He strummed his guitar incessantly and sang song after song in a treacly voice, and every so often he got up and danced around in a little circle, employing a peculiar sideways step. The fact that no one saw or heard him, save Ross and Candy, didn't seem to bother him a bit.

Around 11 o'clock, Ross noticed an old man with a scythe wandering among the tables. No one paid any attention to him, or, for that matter, seemed to see him. For a while Ross was puzzled; then, at 12 on the dot, the old man walked out and a rotund little boy, wearing nothing but a sash, walked in.

"Nuts!" Ross said. "Let's go."

Jack Frost was merrily at work on the window when they entered the apartment, and Ross glimpsed the Sandman lurking in a shadowy corner. The G. A. went over and started making up the sofa. Candy slipped out of her pastel mink and stood provocatively in the middle of the room.

"I'm ready for my good-night kiss," she said.

In mid-January, after a long, drawn-out battle with his G. A., Ross visited a divorce lawyer. "I want my marriage annulled," he said.

"Calm down a little," the lawyer said. "We'll get it annulled for you—if you can show sufficient cause."

"Cause! Why, I can show enough cause to annul twenty marriages! My wife will only let me kiss her!"

"That's no justification for an annulment—or a divorce, either. What do you expect her to do?" Ross felt his face burn. "What do you think I expect her to do?"

"I can't imagine."

"Look, I'm in no mood for a hard time. I'll break it down for you just once, and I'll be damned if I'll draw you a picture. When *you* kiss your wife, does she run away from you and lock you out of the bedroom?"

"Naturally not! But that has nothing to do with you. You're different."

"Why am I different?"

The lawyer looked bewildered. "I-I don't exactly know," he said, "You—you just are."

"Oh for Pete's sake!" Ross said. He stomped out of the room, slammed the door behind him. Five divorce lawyers later, he gave up.

Late in February, Candy started knitting. Little things. She dropped her eyes demurely when Ross confronted her. "I'm going to have a baby," she said.

For a while, Ross couldn't speak. The occasion demanded a careful choice of words, and it was some time before he found the one he wanted. It filled the bill nicely:

"Whose?" he said.

She stared at him. "Why yours, of course. You're my husband, aren't you?"

"I guess that's what you'd call me."

"Then what a silly question to ask! You don't think I'd let anybody else kiss me, do you?"

Ross sighed. "No, I guess you wouldn't at that," he said.

He didn't really believe she was going to have a baby, of course. But he decided to humor her. As the weeks passed, she was happier than he'd ever seen her before, and her knitting, pointless or not, seemed to give her a direction in life that had previously been lacking.

He continued to humor her even after she started buying maternity dresses. If she wanted to retreat completely from reality, it was all right with him. He had to admit, though, that she *was* putting on weight; however, that wasn't too surprising when you considered how much she ate.

The G. A. continued to hang around, strumming his guitar, singing, and polishing his six-guns. Jack Frost was on hand almost every evening, with his putty knife and pail, and the Sandman never missed a night. But, while the situation was predominantly dark, it did have its brighter aspects.

For instance, early in March Ross had to have a tooth pulled, and remembered, when he saw the dentist about to drop it into the waste can, that teeth, in childhood fantasy, had a monetary value. So he asked the dentist for the tooth back, and that night he placed it under his pillow. Sure enough, next morning a shiny coin reposed where it had been. Hmm, he thought ...

That afternoon he visited a nearby novelty store and bought two dozen sets of toy false teeth at 25¢ apiece, and that night, before he went to bed on the sofa, he put one of the sets under his pillow. Twenty teeth, at the current rate of 50¢ apiece, he reasoned, should bring him a total of \$10.00—if the Tooth Fairy fell for the scheme. The Tooth Fairy did, and next morning Ross was \$9.75 to the good. He was in business again.

And then there was the time on Chocolate Rabbit Sunday when he talked the Easter Bunny into leaving golden eggs instead of the conventional hard-boiled variety. He really hauled in the loot that day—and if he'd had any kind of wife at all, she'd have fallen all over him and given him anything he wanted. Candy didn't. She just kept right on knitting, and when 10 o'clock came, stood up and said: "Well aren't you going to kiss me good night, dear?"

June, and girls in summer dresses . . . Ross started looking around. No man, he told himself, had ever had more justification. But the G. A. didn't see it that way at all, and Ross had no sooner made his first pass when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and heard a sonorous voice in his ear:

"The dirtiest critter riding the plains is the critter who steps out on his missus. I aim to keep you clean, podner. Clean. Y'hear me?"

"Go home and get up a game of pinochle with the Sandman and the Tooth Fairy," Ross said. "I'm busy."

"Clean, podner. Clean," the G. A. repeated, and to prove he meant business, he picked Ross up, carried him home, and put him to bed.

Ross stared miserably at the ceiling. What did you do, he asked himself, when the wife you'd got for Christmas turned out to be a dud, and the Guardian Angel you'd got along with her turned out to have the morality of a Zane Grey range rider?

Answer (general): you ordered another wife.

Answer (specific): you wrote, *Dear Santa: Please send me a new wife*, and by so phrasing your request, automatically guaranteed the cancellation of the first wife when the second arrived.

Certainly, in the world of childhood fantasy, a man couldn't have *two* wives!

Ross began to feel better. He started to work on his Santa Claus letter the next day. He worked on it all summer and into the fall, dedicated to the proposition that Santa Claus wasn't going to make a fool out of him two times running. No one bothered him except the Sandman, who persisted in throwing sand in his eyes the minute he began to nod. (Jack Frost had stopped coming around with the advent of warm weather.)

On Halloween, he interrupted his work long enough to steal a besom from a feeble old witch, to catch a crippled leprechaun and make it reveal its treasure's hiding place, and to talk two teen-age brownies into doing his housework for the forthcoming fantasy-year. But the next day he was right back at it again.

Late one November night he heard a tapping on the window. He had just entered item no. 6002 on his list and was debating on whether to treat himself to a brandy or a Scotch and soda. Candy had retired early, saying that she wasn't feeling well.

When the tapping continued, he got up and went over to the window. It was a cold night, and at first he thought that Jack Frost had come back, and he raised the sash, intending to give the pale man a piece of his mind. Then he saw that it wasn't Jack Frost after all.

It was the Stork.

It was also the last straw. Ross slammed the window shut, ran over to his desk, got out pencil, paper and ruler, and went to work on another pentagram.

The Adversary, when he appeared some minutes later, was his usual leering self. "Well," he said, a little tiredly, "what is it this time?"

"I want there *not* to be a Santa Claus," Ross said, "and I want there *not* to be a Sandman and a Jack Frost and a G. A. But most of all, I want there *not* to be a Stork!"

"I see . . . For everyone, or just for yourself?"

"Just for myself, naturally. It's my soul I'm selling.... Besides, they don't exist for everyone."

"They do in a way," the Adversary said, "an eventuality which underlines the 'considerations' I mentioned during our first Meeting. My inability to subdivide childhood fantasy applies to my eliminating it as well as to my materializing it—and my eliminating it would involve taking away not only its present reality, but the normal residue remaining from your childhood as well. To accomplish that, I'd have to go all the way back to your formative years and alter your original attitude. There could be complications—"

"You're not getting through," Ross said.

The Adversary flicked his tail in exasperation. "All I'm trying to bring out," he said, "is the fact that, while the concept of the Stork may seem ridiculous to you now, a long time ago it made a phase of your life bearable and enabled you to grow up retaining the illusions on which the love-life of your particular culture is based."

"I don't need illusions for my love-life," Ross said. "All I need is good old reality."

"Then you shall have it!" The Adversary produced another mimeographed contract, punctured a vein, and began filling in the pertinent blank spaces. He spoke each word aloud as he wrote it down: "Signing of this agreement invalidates the original agreement . . . elimination from life of signer all belief in any and all aspects of childhood fantasy . . . term of agreement: life."

"Again?" Ross asked.

"I'm in another generous mood," the Adversary said, handing him the pen and the contract. Ross hesitated a moment. For some reason, the life clause failed to reassure him this time. Then he thought of Candy sleeping virginally beyond the impenetrable pink panels, of the Stork waiting outside the window. Hurriedly, he punctured one of his own veins and scrawled his name. He handed the pen and the contract back.

"See you later," the Adversary said.

When the smoke had cleared away, Ross looked around the room. The corner where the Sandman usually lurked was empty. He glanced over his shoulder: the G. A. was gone. He listened: the tapping on the window had ceased.

He looked contemplatively at the bedroom door.

For some reason the pink panels left him cold.

But he got up, anyway, and walked over and knocked. "Come in," a warm voice said. "Come in, darling."

He reached out, touched the knob. He knew that this time the door wouldn't be locked. Suddenly he thought of Candy sprawled on the sweaty bed, shameless, with vast naked udders . . . Loathing rose up in his throat, almost choked him. His hand fell away from the knob and he turned and ran from the apartment.

*Filthy creature!* he thought. He hated her so much he couldn't stand it.

He hated her almost as much as he hated his mother.