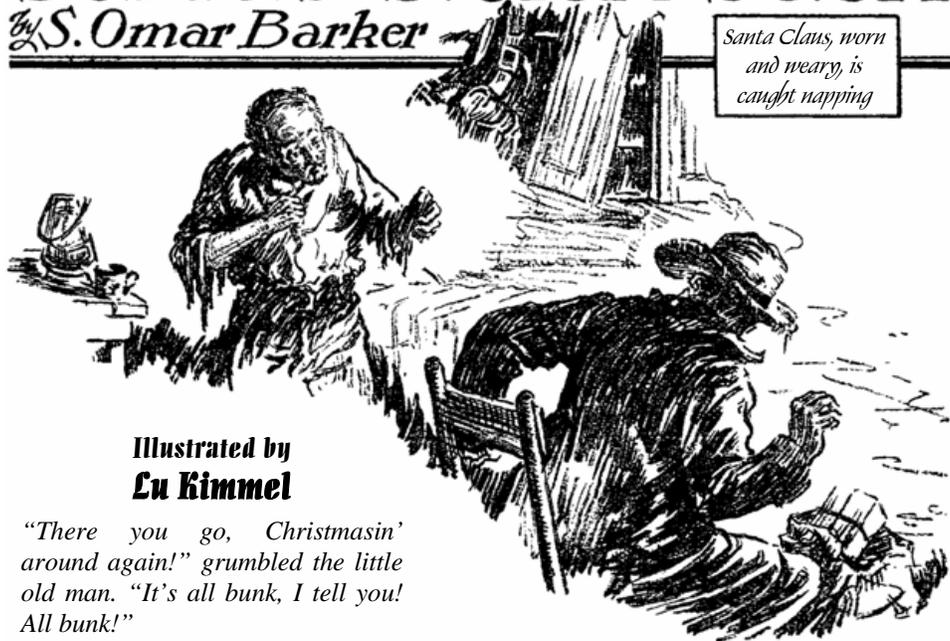


# Santa's Stolen Sack

By S. Omar Barker

Santa Claus, worn  
and weary, is  
caught napping



Illustrated by  
**Lu Kimmel**

*"There you go, Christmasin' around again!" grumbled the little old man. "It's all bunk, I tell you! All bunk!"*

**T**HERE was no lack of Christmas trees up Bobcat Gulch. Weeks before it was time for them, the four wistful-eyed youngsters in Cuth Jecklin's cabin had been flattening their noses against the little square windowpanes to look at them, arrayed in gorgeous stiffness over on the steep, snowy slope opposite. Silvery-white firs, long-limbered red firs, bristly spruces, all of them gleaming with fantastic decorations of snow, all of them dreamlike in their crystal perfection, all of them beautiful to look at; but not one among them all with a bag of candy on it, nor a string of popcorn, nor peanuts, nor apples, nor a horn for lusty young lungs to blow on Christmas morning.

There was indeed a plentiful supply of yuletide trees up the gulch, but to fourteen-year-old orphan Martha and her little brother Ed, and the still-younger twins, Cap and Kitty, all of whom Prospector Jecklin had adopted last summer when their parents were drowned in a mountain torrent—to them, the frost-festooned spruces had come to be but a dismal evidence of a snowbound winter, and, like enough, no candy for Christmas.

Not that they whimpered about it at all, for they were game, loyal little tads, every one of them. Their "pop," Jecklin, had laid in a good-enough supply of plain food, and they were neither cold nor hungry during the chill days when he pecked away with a pick in his prospect tunnel; but he had

promised them, if the snow did not get too deep, to go over the divide and down to Vallecitos to make certain arrangements with one Santa Claus for a sack full of candy and toys to be delivered in their stockings Christmas morning. And, with every new snow, the prospect of his going seemed less and less. Middle-aged, gray-haired, leathery-faced Cuth Jecklin comforted them jokingly, though his own heart was heavy for more reasons than one.

"Never you mind, Cap," he told the little four-year-old boy, "there's still some sugar in the sack, and if the snow keeps on, me and Marthy'll make you candy."

"And a popgun, pop?" asked little Cap. "And a dolly for Kitty?"

Pop Jecklin's heart ached for his little charges, as every week brought another snow to deepen the drifts on the divide, and as the little supply of his gold ore, which was rich enough to be turned into money, stayed pitifully small.

Jecklin knew where the gold was. The slant of the vein he worked in told him that. But it was on old Joe McGillis' claim, not his. And old Joe, himself too skinny, and starved, and old, and weak to work it, would snarl like a wolf at anyone who even suggested a partnership that might mean wealth for both of them. Already he had promised to shoot Jecklin if he came nosing around, anymore, talking partnership. So there they were:

Jecklin, able-bodied and intelligent enough to get in and work out the tunnel into old Joe's mother lode, but old Joe too miserly, and distrustful, and hateful, to permit a partner to do what his own strength could not accomplish.

So long as he had been alone, Cuth Jecklin had not minded prospector's poverty; but now he had the kids to think about, and, as often as not, his nights were sleepless with worry. If only old Joe would be reasonable, plenty would soon be theirs.

A week before Christmas, it cleared, and the sun came out. Flaky snowdrifts melted enough to pack down into grainy banks that would hold a man's weight. In two days, the spruce trees were beginning to lose their burden of snow.

With all he could carry of nugget chunks of gold-bearing ore in the sack on his back, Pop Jecklin kissed Martha and Ed, and Cap, and Kitty good-by, warned them again not to venture too far out from the cabin, and to take care of each other. Then he set out eastward over the divide toward Vallecitos.

"Your pop, together with Mister Santa Claus, is goin' to be back here Christmas Eve, little fellers, with an old sack, plumb full of Christmas," he told them, as he set out.

"A popgun, pop?" Cap called after him. "And a dolly for Kitty?"

"Sure, Mike!" he called back over his shoulder, as he disappeared into the forest of firs and spruces.

Once over the snowy divide, he would drop down to the Jaquez ranch where he could get a pony to ride on into the little village. With good luck, he should be back easily by noon of the day before Christmas.

A little after he had crossed the summit of the range, he passed the slanty cabin of old Joe McGillis. He had not intended to stop, but when he saw the old man standing so disconsolate and alone in his crooked doorway, a rush of pity came over him. The spirit of Christmas seemed to warm his veins, driving out all remembrance of old Joe's stubborn enmity. Puffing from the stiff exertion of plodding through the snow, he came up to McGillis' doorway.

"Howdy, McGillis! And a merry Christmas to you in advance! I'm on my way out for some Santa Claus for the kids, and what shall I bring you back for a bit of cheer? Some tobacco? Or a chunk of salt side?"

Old Joe, his skinny, half-starved body showing

in spots through the string-tied rags he wore for clothes, stood silent a second; then a sneer curled the parchment-like lips under his beard.

"Christmas, hey? It's all a lot of bunk! Git on your way!"

"The durned old coot!" snorted Jecklin as he went on. Yet even as old Joe spoke, something wistful shone in his eyes, belying the anger in his words.

The next day it snowed again. In the little cabin up Bobcat Gulch, little noses once more squashed themselves against the windows to watch, lonesomely, while new festoons of white settled like furry robes upon the trees. Cap and Kitty, old enough to realize that the snow would hinder their pop's return, yet too young to be philosophical about it, questioned Martha querulously for a while, and then gave way to tears.

"Aw, you act like a couple of babies!" jeered eight-year-old Eddie. "I bet pop ain't a-cryin', and I'll bet he's out in it, too! Come here, and I'll whittle you out a wooden gun, Cap."

"Me wanna really one!" Cap protested inconsolably.

"Dolly! Wanna dolly!" sobbed Kitty. "Want my pop!"

"He'll be here, never worry—anyway, by Christmas Eve!" said Martha cheerily. But in her thorough, if limited, experience of the mountains, she doubted her own hope.

Her doubts were well founded.

Over from Old Mike and the other skyline peaks to the northeast, there whirled a drifting, stinging blizzard, sifting snow, in rapid inches, not only upon the mountains, but out to the mesas and foothills, even down to the village where Cuth Jecklin had, with difficulty, finally managed to get a small advance of money for the ore he carried.

Two days before Christmas, he lashed a big sack of well-wrapped Christmas goods on behind his saddle and headed back into the mountains. But instead of making the Jaquez ranch easily on the first day, he encountered such drifts that the pony, literally, gave out, and he was compelled to leave him at a little Mexican ranch and get another, a fractious, half-broke colt that gave him no end of trouble.

The whispering darkness of a snow-stormy night was upon him before he realized it. Yet he rode on. Then suddenly the colt shied madly from a snow-hooded black stump, slipped on the steep

slope, and went down. When the pony got up again, Cuth Jecklin lay stunned for a moment, a twisting pain at one of his ankles. Then, with a stifled groan, he got to his feet, mounted, and forced the horse on until they came to the Jaquez cabins.

There, with hot water and liniment for his swollen ankle, he rested for the night, hoping for the storm to stop. But toward dawn it had not, and with warm food in his stomach and a lunch in his pack, Jecklin got on his snowshoes and started on afoot, despite the protests of the ranchman.

"It's suicide, Jecklin!" exclaimed Jaquez. "The kids will be all right without you. Wait till the storm is over!"

"Tomorrow's Christmas, Jack," replied Jecklin, tapping the sack he had swung to his shoulders, "but it won't be, for them, unless I get in with this here poke of stuff. I'll make it all right, don't worry!"

Jaquez knew the prospector for a strong man and an experienced traveler on snowshoes, yet he shook his head doubtfully as he watched the dark shadow of his bulk fade into the dimness of dawn in the timber.

Up Bobcat Gulch, the four children watched for Pop Jecklin in vain that day, and the early twilight found all four of them near to tears. Little Martha, quaintly grown up, kept smiling, but her heart was a torment of fears. Suppose pop should be lost or frozen in the storm? Suppose—

Floundering, plodding, tumbling, a lumbering snowy hulk, Cuth Jecklin, an hour after dusk, came suddenly upon a group of shadows in the dark that he recognized as old Joe's cabins. He bumped stumblingly against a door, calling aloud:

"McGillis! Joe McGillis!"

From inside came a snuffly, snarling voice, half plaintive in its weak fierceness.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

With slow reluctance, the door opened.

"You, Jecklin? What do you want?"

"I'm done out, Joe," answered Jecklin from the doorway. "Let me in."

"Christmasin', eh?" There was still a quavery sneer in the voice. "Well, I ain't specially fond of company, but I reckon there ain't no help for it. Come on in."

Before the glowing fireplace, Cuth Jecklin laid down his burden, took off his snowshoes and his cumbersome wrappings, and stretched out his half-chilled body. His host offered neither conversation

nor food. Even in the flickering red light of burning logs, Jecklin thought that somehow the man's scraggly whiskered face looked more haggard, his eyes more burning and sunken than when he had seen him but a few days before. Exhausted as he was with fatigue, nevertheless, pity surged through his heart for the poor old fellow. For a while, neither spoke. Then:

"It's Christmas Eve, Joe," said Jecklin soberly. "I thought I could make it back to them by now. Poor little fellers, waitin' and waitin' over there all alone! But there ain't a chance now. Most likely not even tomorrow, me with this ankle all blowed up. Just think of it, man; Christmas Eve, and no Santa Claus for the kids!"

"There you go, Christmasin' around again!" grumbled the old man. "Makes me plumb sick to hear you. All bunk, I tell you! All bunk!"

The faintness of the old man's muttering brought a pang of pity to Jecklin's heart, even as he flushed with anger at his words. Then suddenly it came to him why old Joe had offered him no supper: he had none to offer! He was starving, and too bitterly proud to acknowledge it! For a second Jecklin hesitated, then shoved a hand into his Christmas sack, rummaged around, and brought out two packages. One was a part of the lunch Jaquez had given him. The other a bag of popcorn and candy. Silently he placed them on old Joe's thin knees, where, for a minute, they lay untouched.

"You'd better eat some, Joe," said Jecklin at length. "You'll feel better."

Tremblingly the old man obeyed, but he said no word of thanks.

Jecklin, as he fell heavily asleep on his pallet before the fire, remembered dreamily of having heard some time or other about how old Joe happened to come to the mountains: a drunken son murdering his own mother at Christmas time, old Joe, in turn, killing him. Jecklin's recollection of the story drifted into uneasy dreaming and then, exhaustion upon him, into sleep.

Muscles that have strained and toiled in the outdoor cold all day long demand a sleep that is almost deathlike in its utter obliviousness to outside happenings. And so, with exhaustion and warmth upon him, Cuth Jecklin slumbered.

When he awoke, later, there was a chill in the room. Only a few red embers lay fading in the fireplace. White moonlight sifted in through the snow-framed window of the cabin. An eerie

silence—the silence of snow-muffled mountains and frozen stars after a storm—lay over the outside world. Then, all at once, Jecklin realized that there was utter silence in the room, too. No sound of breathing, no movement in the ragged bed where old Joe should have been. No feel of human presence in the air. He sat up and looked around.

Old Joe was gone. So, too, was the sack of Christmas toys and candies. Jecklin rubbed his eyes and looked again. Perhaps old Joe had merely moved the bundle. Jecklin got up and hobbled about the room, his sore ankle stiff. Even in the shadowy moonlight he could tell that his first impression had been right. Neither old Joe nor the Christmas bag was there.

Cuth Jecklin cursed in bitter silence. What crazy thing had old Joe done now? He remembered that there were a half-dozen old mining tunnels within a few paces of the cabin, and with that remembrance came a realization of what had most likely happened: evidently the crazy old miner had stolen the Christmas sack and gone to hide it in one or another of these tunnels. Jecklin could hardly contain his anger; he wondered what he should do to the man, when he should come back to the cabin.

But old Joe did not come back. Jecklin listened in vain as he thonged his snowshoes upon his feet. When he opened the door, a crisp, edgy cold seemed fairly to slap him in the face. The storm was over, the stars and moon were out, but frost filled the air with keen-edged blades. Outside, Jecklin could see a rumpling of moonlit snow that he knew to be man-tracks leading away from the cabin.

For once, blood lust crept into his heart. If old Joe had taken his kids' Christmas things and hidden them, or thrown them out into the snow, or wandered off insanely into the night and lost them, he would kill him. He cursed himself, too, for having slept so soundly.

Then, binding on his snowshoes, and bundled up again in sweater, jacket, and coat, he set out limpingly to follow, in the frost-glintoned moonlight, the line of tracks that wobbled away from the cabin door. To his surprise, they led to no old mining tunnel. Uphill they went, great, floundering tracks, on the snow-hidden trail toward Bobcat Gulch. With a strange, wondering fear in his heart, Cuth Jecklin followed. His ankle throbbled with pain, but he did not heed it.

The white gold of morning sun, filtering

through the frost-festooned trees of Bobcat Gulch, was already glinting upon the Jecklin cabin, when its owner, still following the tracks of old Joe McGillis, came in sight of it. Ahead of him, the tracks wallowed and wobbled up to the cabin and disappeared at its door. Smoke curled from the chimney, but there were no noses flattened against the windows, no eager eyes watching for him.

In silent dread, Pop Jecklin stepped softly up to a window and looked in. Then a slow grin appeared under his frosted mustache, and something strangely like tears warmed the coldness of his eyeballs. For inside he saw old Joe, the frost and snow still clinging to the poor rags he wore for clothes, but with a look of joy in his sunken old eyes, emptying with trembling hands a snowy bag of Christmas toys and candies. And around him, Martha, and Ed, and little Cap, and Kitty, fairly danced in delight. Santa Claus had not failed them, after all.

Suddenly, old Joe shivered and slumped to the floor. In a jiffy, Jecklin was inside, and he and Martha had him up on a bed. For a second, Pop Jecklin gathered his four "young uns" in his arms and hugged them tightly. Then he turned to rub life again into the starved, worn-out body of old Joe.

It was an hour before the old man opened his eyes, but when he did, it was to smile weakly, the old snarl gone from his lips.

"God bless you, Joe!" exclaimed Jecklin, gripping his hand. "And a merry Christmas to you, too!"

"Aw, Jecklin!" protested the old man. "All this here crazy Christmasin'! I just figured you wouldn't be able to make it, so I come on ahead with the stuff. Forgit it, and let's you and me talk minin' for a while. I'm needin' a pardner for that mother lode claim of mine, Cuth, and—"

But Martha, and Ed, and Cap, and Kitty, had other ideas of what to talk about on Christmas morning.

"Lookit pop! I got a popgun!" said Cap.

"Me gotta dolly!" smiled little Kitty, as she held up her present; and then, solemnly to old Joe: "Are you Santa Claus, really?"

"He sure is, honey!" said Pop Jecklin. "Give him a kiss."

"Bunk!" grinned old Joe Santa Claus, née McGillis. But something in his eyes gave the lie to the word, as baby Kitty kissed him.