

# THE PRODIGIOUS SON

*The Man Who Did His Best to "Come Back"*

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Illustrations by Joseph Sheard

THE great railway company unwittingly gave shelter to Pox Sandy and Blinker John. In an isolated corner of the freight-yards the two had discovered a box-car with door ajar, and had gone no farther. It was warmer inside than out, and there was straw to sprawl upon while one enjoyed the fruits of a day profitably spent.

Christmas time is the great harvest for those in Sandy's and John's class. Scarecrows they were, dirty, ragged, evil and mean as to face, with the smell of whiskey always upon them; and yet, in their way, pitiful because of their misery. They circulated freely among the Christmas shoppers, receiving small contributions from the charitable and larger ones from the careless. At kitchen doors the whine for a meal seldom went unheeded at such a season.

As John said, "Pickings had been good," and so the glad Christmas tide, combined with a sort of Harvest Home feeling, was to be properly celebrated. "Eat, Drink and be Merry" is the old slogan. Neither was in any need of eating, nor had either any definite ideas on mirth; so it remained to make up on the second item. In a dim corner of the car, Pox Sandy lay on his back, in the attitude of one who muses on the glory of the heavenly bodies. From time to time he raised above him a hand containing a dark object, remaining for some seconds *somewhat* in the attitude of an astronomer looking through a spy-glass; and after each observation he would lay the instrument carefully aside with a grunt of satisfaction.

Blinker John sat nearer the door of the car. He had not yet passed the talkative stage of his intoxication.

"Lasht Chrish—sh, Chrish—Chrishmush eve," said John, "I remember, went to see a show. Ten, twenty, thirty—great show, too! Theatre on River Street—reg'lar Chrish—reg'lar Chrishmush show it was, too. You should have seen that show, Pox. I jist fergit th' name of th' show—it was called 'The Return of the Prod—the Prod—the Prodigious Son.' That's it, Pox, 'The Return of the Prodigious Son.' D'hear what I'm tellin' ye, Pox?"

John turned his head and regarded his inanimate audience with a fishy eye. The mechanical up and down movement of the dark object had in no wise abated during the recital.

"Pox, ye drunken beat," said he, with a whine, "ain't ye listenin' t' what I'm sayin'?"

Pox grunted. "Sure I heard you," he said, "The Return of th' Prodigush—sh Son, I heard ye all right."

Blinker John grinned foolishly. "Ye should have seen that show, Pox," he said. "They had a reg'lar snow-storm, just like what it is to-night, real snow comin' down—and a old farm house with a dog in it, an' a couple of ol' farm folks. Ol' farmer an' his wife; an' they was in turrible trouble—desprit. Listenin', Pox? Them ol' farm folks was in turrible trouble, Pox—oh turrible, 'nough to make ye weep, it was—" In fact the maudlin Blinker almost wept, himself, at the remembrance.

"It was a swell show, Pox," he continued. "Ye see the ol' couple was goin' t' be kicked off the farm fer some reason. I fergit what fer. There was a ugly-lookin' guy with a black hat was goin' kick them off. He was a hellof a guy, Pox. Say, Pox, d'ye hear what I'm sayin'?"

"Hellof a guy," came from the corner.

"That's right," continued the narrator. "But he never done it, ye betcher life, never done it. He got a paste on the jaw instead. The young guy come in, just in time. He was a swell young guy—you know th' one—that prodigious feller I was tellin' you about. Well, Pox, he sure come in just in time; an' he pokes th' other guy on the jaw. An' he was a millionaire, Pox—a millionaire what had run away from home. An' them ol' farm folks, they was sure glad t' see him!"

Here the whiskey inside Blinker John began to assert itself, it coursed through his veins and imbued his sluggish mind with a new life. No mean exponent of the histrionic art had been lost to the world in Blinker John. He was on his feet, and had even captured his besotten audience, who lay spellbound in the dim corner.

"Me boy, me boy!" says th' ol' dame. "Me

boy what was lost, ye've come home—home t' me!" "Yes, mother," says th' young guy, "I've been away a long time, but I'm home at last. You'll never want fer nothin' more, mother, as long as—" "Say, you dirty loafer, what d' you think you're doin' in my car?"

Was ever noble characterization of noble sentiment more tryingly interrupted? At the door of the box-car appeared the outraged face of one of the road officials, confronting the outraged, but crestfallen, Blinker. It was as though some common-minded policeman had broken in upon Mark Antony's oration and ordered him to move on and stop attracting a crowd.

"Now then," continued the official, "come out!"

Blinker came out.

He was aided just enough to land him in a snow-drift. From his hand fell the bottle and lay spilling its life blood out upon the snow. The official, little suspecting that inside the car lay the shivering person of Pox Sandy, pulled the heavy door to, and snapped the lock.

"Now git out of here," he said, "an' don't come into these yards again, gettin' crazy drunk an' raisin' the dead with your racket."

John picked himself up and fled. It was not for him to divulge the presence of his partner or otherwise argue the matter. Look out for yourself was "the code," and he obeyed it whenever possible.

INSIDE the car Pox Sandy lay quaking until he heard the heavy crunch of the official boots in departure. He smiled to himself regarding his lucky escape. He was far too drowsy to appreciate the sinister significance of being locked in an empty box-car; and so, peacefully smiling, he closed his eyes in sleep.

The banging and shunting of the car, as it was coupled into a long freight train, would have waked the dead—but not Sandy. Neither did he hear the long, starting-whistle which re-echoed through the night, or notice the grind and sway as the wheels began to turn beneath him.

The long night train went roaring out from the



"He was soon on the open road."

city, which echoed back its roar as it passed. Under subways it went, and over bridges from which one could see vast areas of twinkling street lamps and windows—rich palaces and meagre homes, where the spirit of Christmas waited for the coming day. Beyond the city it passed, taking its way through great, quiet spaces, where nothing moved but the falling snow; through a land where all was dark save where a light in the window of some distant cottage peered out into the night. On it went—carrying the sleeping Pox Sandy along with it.

Sandy could sleep anywhere; nor was he particular as to where he laid himself down. He had yet to discover the place dirty enough, evil-smelling enough, or uncomfortable enough to disturb his dreams. Add to this the large amount of bad whiskey consumed, and beside Sandy the Seven Sleepers were as mere nervous insomniacs.

It was high noon before he stirred. Sharp blades of light pierced the narrow seams of his prison, and played over his grimy features. The car had come to a stop and outside could be heard an occasional shout and the crunch of passing feet in the snow.

Sandy, after lamely combatting the pain in his head for some minutes, finally opened his eyes. He stared blankly at the planks above him, trying to remember if anything of note had happened recently or was about to happen. He couldn't remember anything, however, and found his mind quite incapable of thought for the present. He stared hypnotically at a sun-beam shining through a crack, and presently he began to talk.

"—I've been away a long time, but I'm home at last. You'll never want fer nothin', mother—"

Then he remembered. He sat up with a jerk, and immediately clapped both hands to his head and held on until the dynamite inside ceased exploding.

"Blinker, ye darn fool," he muttered. "What d'ye think you know about Prod—Prodigious—. Gawd, I got an awful head."

AT this juncture there was a sharp click and a heavy grinding, as the door of the car was thrust back. The blinding glare of sunlight smote the unhappy tramp like a stroke of lightning, keeling him over.

There was a moment's comparative silence and then a voice above him was saying: "Well, if that ain't the limit! Didn't I tell ye last night t' keep off my car? What d'ye think this is, anyhow? Public park? Up ye git, now. Up ye git!"

Sandy was dragged to his knees, hauled to the open door and flung out into the snow. The burly lineman stood in the doorway and tried to express himself.

"The nerve o' some o' you loafers," he said, "s'enough t' make a canal horse look like a spring squab. Here I trun y'off last night, an' I trun y'off again this morning, an' I guess when we gets to the end o' the run, there you'll be, waitin' t' be trun off some more. If this weren't the Blessed day o' Grace I'd learn you



"You won't forget what I told you," a voice was saying.