E. W. HORNUNG

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A CONSCIENTIOUS ASS

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Pocket Upton had come down late and panting, in spite of his daily exemption from first school, and the postcard on his plate had taken away his remaining modicum of breath. He could have wept over it in open hall, and would probably have done so in the subsequent seclusion of his own study, had not an obvious way out of his difficulty been bothering him by that time almost as much as the difficulty itself. For it was not a very honest way, and the unfortunate Pocket had been called “a conscientious ass” by some of the nicest fellows in his house. Perhaps he deserved the epithet for going even as straight as he did to his house-master, who was discovered correcting proses with a blue pencil and a briar pipe.

“Please, sir, Mr. Coverley can't have me, sir. He's got a case of chicken-pox, sir.”

[pg 4] The boy produced the actual intimation in a few strokes of an honoured but laconic pen. The man poised his pencil and puffed his pipe.

“Then you must come back to-night, and I'm just as glad. It's all nonsense your staying the night whenever you go up to see that doctor of yours.”

“He makes a great point of it, sir. He likes to try some fresh stuff on me, and then see what sort of night I have.”

“You could go up again to-morrow.”

“Of course I could, sir,” replied Pocket Upton, with a delicate emphasis on his penultimate. At the moment he

was perhaps neither so acutely conscientious nor such an ass as his critics considered him.

“What else do you propose?” inquired Mr. Spearman.

“Well, sir, I have plenty of other friends in town, sir. Either the Knaggses or Miss Harbottle would put me up in a minute, sir.”

“Who are the Knaggses?”

“The boys were with me at Mr. Coverley's, sir; they go to Westminster now. One of them stayed with us last holidays. They live in St. John's Wood Park.”

“And the lady you mentioned?”

“Miss Harbottle, sir, an old friend of my [pg 5] mother's; it was through her I went to Mr. Coverley's, and I've often stayed there. She's in the Wellington Road, sir, quite close to Lord's.”

Mr. Spearman smiled at the gratuitous explanation of an eagerness that other lads might have taken more trouble to conceal. But there was no guile in any Upton; in that one respect the third and last of them resembled the great twin brethren of whom he had been prematurely voted a “pocket edition” on his arrival in the school. He had few of their other merits, though he took a morbid interest in the games they played by light of nature, as well as in things both beyond and beneath his brothers and the average boy. You cannot sit up half your nights with asthma and be an average boy. This was obvious even to Mr. Spearman, who was an average man. He had never disguised his own disappointment in the youngest Upton, but had often made him the butt of outspoken and disastrous comparisons. Yet in his softer moments he had some sympathy with the

failure of an otherwise worthy family; this fine June morning he seemed even to understand the joy of a jaunt to London for a boy who was getting very little out of his school life. He made a note of the two names and addresses.

“You're quite sure they'll put you up, are you?” “Absolutely certain, sir.”

[pg 6] “But you'll come straight back if they can't?”

“Rather, sir!”

“Then run away, and don't miss your train.”

Pocket interpreted the first part of the injunction so literally as to arrive very breathless in his study. That diminutive cell was garnished with more ambitious pictures than the generality of its order; but the best of them was framed in the ivy round the lattice window, and its foreground was the nasturtiums in the flower-box. Pocket glanced down into the quad, where the fellows were preparing construes for second school in sunlit groups on garden seats. At that moment the bell began. And by the time Pocket had changed his black tie for a green one with red spots, in which he had come back after the Easter holidays, the bell had stopped and the quad was empty; before it filled again he would be up in town and on his way to Welbeck Street in a hansom.

The very journey was a joy. It was such sport to be flying through a world of buttercups and daisies in a train again, so refreshing to feel as good as anybody else in the third smoker; for even the grown men in the corner seats did not dream of calling the youth an “old ass,” much less a young one, to his face. His friends and contemporaries at school were in the habit of employing the ameliorating adjective,

but there were still a few fellows [pg 7] in Pocket's house who made an insulting point of the other. All, however, seemed agreed as to the noun; and it was pleasant to cast off friend and foe for a change, to sit comfortably unknown and unsuspected of one's foibles in the train. It made Pocket feel a bit of a man; but then he really was almost seventeen, and in the Middle Fifth, and allowed to smoke asthma cigarettes in bed. He took one out of a cardboard box in his bag, and thought it might do him good to smoke it now. But an adult tobacco-smoker looked so curiously at the little thin cross between cigar and cigarette, that it was transferred to a pocket unlit, and the coward hid himself behind his paper, in which there were several items of immediate interest to him. Would the match hold out at Lord's? If not, which was the best of the Wednesday matinees? Pocket had received a pound from home for his expenses, so that these questions took an adventitious precedence over even such attractive topics as an execution and a murder that bade fair to lead to one. But the horrors had their turn, and having supped on the newspaper supply, he continued the feast in *Henry Dunbar,* the novel he had brought with him in his bag. There was something like a murder! It was so exciting as to detach Pocket Upton from the flying buttercups and daisies, from the reek of the smoking carriage, the real crimes [pg 8] in the paper, and all thoughts of London until he found himself there too soon.

The asthma specialist was one of those enterprising practitioners whose professional standing is never quite on a par with their material success. The injurious discrepancy may have spoilt his temper, or it may be that his temper

was at the root of the prejudice against him. He was never very amiable with Pocket Upton, a casual patient in every sense; but this morning Dr. Bompas had some call to complain.

“You mean to tell me,” he expostulated, “that you've gone back to the cigarettes in spite of what I said last time? If you weren't a stupid schoolboy I should throw up your case!”

Pocket did not wish to have his case thrown up; it would mean no more days and nights in town. So he accepted his rebuke without visible resentment.

“It's the only way I can stop an attack,” he mumbled.

“Nonsense!” snapped the specialist. “You can make yourself coffee in the night, as you've done before.”

“I can't at school. They draw the line at that.”

“Then a public school is no place for you. I've said so from the first. Your people should have listened to me, and sent you on a long sea voyage [pg 9] under the man I recommended, in the ship I told them about. She sails the day after to-morrow, and you should have sailed in her.”

The patient made no remark; but he felt as sore as his physician on the subject of that long sea voyage. It would have meant a premature end to his undistinguished schooldays, and goodbye to all thought of following in his brothers' steps on the field of schoolboy glory. But he might have had adventures beyond the pale of that circumscribed arena, he might have been shipwrecked on a desert island, and lived to tell a tale beyond the dreams of envious athletes, if his people had but taken kindly to the scheme. But they had been so very far from taking to it at all, with

the single exception of his only sister, that the boy had not the heart to discuss it now.

“If only there were some medicine one could take to stop an attack!” he sighed. “But there doesn't seem to be any.”

“There are plenty of preventives,” returned the doctor. “That's what we want. Smoking and inhaling all sorts of rubbish is merely a palliative that does more harm than good in the long run.”

“But it does you good when the preventives fail. If I could get a good night without smoking I should be thankful.”

[pg 10] “If I promise you a good night will you give me your cigarettes to keep until to-morrow?”

“If you like.”

The doctor wrote a prescription while the boy produced the cardboard box from his bag.

“Thank you,” said Bompas, as they made an exchange. “I don't want you even to be tempted to smoke to-night, because I know what the temptation must be when you can't get your breath. You will get this prescription made up in two bottles; take the first before you go to bed to-night, and the second if you wake with an attack before five in the morning. You say you are staying the night with friends; better give me the name and let me see if they're on the telephone before you go. I want you to go to bed early, tell them not to call you in the morning, and come back to me the moment you've had your breakfast.”

They parted amicably after all, and Pocket went off only wondering whether he ought to have said positively that he was staying with friends when he might be going back to school. But Dr. Bompas had been so short with him at first

as to discourage unnecessary explanations; besides, there could be no question of his going back that night. And the difficulty of the morning, which he had quite forgotten in the train, was not allowed to mar a moment of his day in town.

[pg 11] The time-table of that boy's day must speak for itself. It was already one o'clock, and he was naturally hungry, especially after the way his breakfast had been spoilt by Coverley's card. At 1.15 he was munching a sausage roll and sipping chocolate at a pastry-cook's in Oxford Street. The sausage roll, like the cup of chocolate, was soon followed by another; and a big Bath bun completed a debauch of which Dr. Bompas would undoubtedly have disapproved.

At 1.45, from the top of an Atlas omnibus in Baker Street, he espied a placard with “Collapse of Middlesex” in appalling capitals. And at the station he got down to learn the worst before going on to Lord's for nothing.

The worst was so hopelessly bad that Pocket wished himself nearer the theatres, and then it was that the terra-cotta pile of Madame Tussaud's thrust itself seductively upon his vision. He had not been there for years. He had often wanted to go again, and go alone. He remembered being taken by his sister when a little boy at Coverley's, but she had refused to go into the Chamber of Horrors, and he had been relieved at the time but sorry ever afterwards, because so many of the boys of those days had seen everything and seemed none the worse for the adventure. It was one of the things he had always wanted not so much to [pg 12] do as to have done. The very name of the Chamber of Horrors had frozen his infant blood when he first heard it

on the lips of a criminological governess. On the brink of seventeen there was something of the budding criminologist about Pocket Upton himself; had not a real murder and *Henry Dunbar* formed his staple reading in the train? And yet the boy had other sensibilities which made him hesitate outside the building, and enter eventually with quite a nutter under the waistcoat.

A band in fantastic livery was playing away in the marble hall; but Pocket had no ear for their music, though he was fond enough of a band. And though history was one of his few strong points at school, the glittering galaxy of kings and queens appealed to him no more than the great writers at their little desks and the great cricketers in their unconvincing flannels. They were waxworks one and all. But when the extra sixpence had been paid at the inner turnstile, and he had passed down a dungeon stair into the dim vaults below, his imagination was at work upon the dreadful faces in the docks before he had brought his catalogue to bear on one of them.

Here were wretches whose vile deeds had long been familiar to the schoolboy through a work on his father's shelves called *Annals of Our Time.* He recalled bad nights when certain of those annals [pg 13] had kept him awake long after his attack; and here were the actual monsters, not scowling and ferocious as he had always pictured them, but far more horribly demure and plump. Here were immortal malefactors like the Mannings; here were Rush and Greenacre cheek by jowl, looking as though they had stepped out of Dickens in their obsolete raiment, looking anything but what they had been. Some wore the very

clothes their quick bodies had filled; here and there were authentic tools of death, rusty pistols, phials of poison with the seals still bright, and a smug face smirking over all in self-conscious infamy. There was not enough of the waxwork about these creatures; in the poor light, and their own clothes, and the veritable dock in which many of them had heard their doom, they looked hideously human and alive. One, a little old man, sat not in the dock but on the drop itself, the noose dangling in front of him; and the schoolboy felt sorry for him, for his silver bristles, for the broad arrows on his poor legs, until he found out who it was. Then he shuddered. It was Charles Peace. He had first heard of Charles Peace from the nice governess aforesaid; and here under his nose were the old ruffian's revolver, and the strap that strapped it to his wrist, with the very spectacles he had wiped and worn. The hobbledehoy was almost as timorously [pg 14] entranced as he had been in infancy by untimely tale of crime. He stood gloating over the gruesome relics, over ropes which had hanged men whose trials he had read for himself in later days, and yet wondering with it all whether he would ever get these things out of his mind again. They filled it to overflowing. He might have had the horrid place to himself. Yet he had entered it with much amusement at the heels of a whole family in deep mourning, a bereaved family drowning their sorrow in a sea of gore, their pilot through the catalogue a conscientious orphan with a monotonous voice and a genius for mis-pronunciation. Pocket had soon ceased to see or hear him or any other being not made of wax. And it was only when he was trying to place a nice-looking murderer in a straw hat,

who suddenly moved into a real sightseer like himself, that the unwholesome spell was broken.

Pocket was not sorry to be back in the adulterated sunshine and the comparatively fresh air of the Marylebone Road. He was ashamed to find that it was after four o'clock. Guy and Vivian Knaggs would be home from Westminster in another hour. Still it was no use getting there before them, and he might as well walk as not; it was pleasant to rub shoulders with flesh and blood once more, and to look in faces not made of wax in the devil's image. His way, which he knew of old, would [pg 15] naturally have led him past Miss Harbottle's door; but, as she was only to be his second string for the night, he preferred not to be seen by that old lady yet. Such was the tiny spring of an important action; it led the wanderer into Circus Road and a quite unforeseen temptation.

In the Circus Road there happens to be a highly respectable pawnbroker's shop; in the pawnbroker's window the chances are that you might still find a motley collection of umbrellas, mandolines, family Bibles, ornaments and clocks, strings of watches, trays of purses, opera-glasses, biscuit-boxes, photograph frames and cheap jewellery, all of which could not tempt you less than they did Pocket Upton the other June. There were only two things in the window that interested him at all, and they were not both temptations. One was an old rosewood camera, and Pocket was interested in cameras old and new; but the thing that tempted him was a little revolver at five-and-six, with what looked like a box of cartridges beside it, apparently thrown in for the price. A revolver to take back to school! A revolver

to fire in picked places on the slow walks with a slow companion which were all the exercise this unfortunate fellow could take! A revolver and cartridges complete, so that one could try it now, in no time, with Guy and Vivian at the end of their garden in [pg 16] St. John's Wood Park! And all very likely for five bob if one bargained a bit!

Pocket took out his purse and saw what a hole the expenditure of any such sum would make. But what was that if it filled a gap in his life? Of coure it would have been breaking a school rule, but he was prepared to take the consequences if found out; it need not involve his notion of dishonour. Still, it must be recorded that the young or old as was conscientious enough to hesitate before making his fatal plunge into the pawnbroker's shop.

A BOY ABOUT TOWN

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The young Westminsters had not come in when Pocket finally cast up in St. John's Wood Park. But their mother was at home, and she gave the boy a cup of tepid tea out of a silver tea-pot in the drawing-room. Mrs. Knaggs was a large lady who spoke her mind with much freedom, at all events to the young. She remarked how much Upton (so she addressed him) had altered; but her tone left Pocket in doubt as to whether any improvement was implied. She for one did not approve of his luncheon in Oxford Street, much less of the way [pg 17] he had spent a summer's afternoon; indeed, she rather wondered at his being allowed alone in London at all. Pocket, who could sometimes shine in

conversation with his elders, at once reminded Mrs. Knaggs that her own Westminster boys were allowed alone in London every day of their lives. But Mrs. Knaggs said that was a very different thing, and that she thought Pocket's public school must be very different from Westminster. Pocket bridled, but behaved himself; he knew where he wanted to stay the night, and got as far towards inviting himself as to enlarge upon Mr. Coverley's misfortune and his own disappointment. Mrs. Knaggs in her turn did ask him where he meant to and even the conscientious Pocket caught himself declaring he had no idea. Then the boys were heard returning, and Mrs. Knaggs said of course he would stop to schoolroom supper, and Pocket thanked her as properly as though it were the invitation he made sure must follow. After all, Vivian Knaggs had stayed at Pocket's three weeks one Christmas, and Guy a fortnight at Easter; the boys themselves would think of that; it was not a matter to broach to them, or one to worry about, prematurely.

Vivian and Guy were respectively rather older and rather younger than Pocket, and they came in looking very spruce, the one in his Eton jacket, the [pg 18] other in tails, but both in shiny toppers that excited an unworthy prejudice in the wearer of the green tie with red spots. They seemed very glad to see him, however, and the stiffness was wearing off even before Pocket produced his revolver in the basement room where the two Westminsters prepared their lessons and had their evening meal.

The revolver melted the last particle of ice, though Vivian Knaggs pronounced it an old pin-firer, and Guy said he would not fire it for a thousand pounds. This only made

Pocket the more eager to show what he and his revolver were made of, then and there in the garden, and the more confident that it never would be heard in the house.

“It would,” answered Vivian, “and seen as well. No, if you want to have a shot let's stick up a target outside this window, and fire from just inside.”

The window was a French one leading into the back garden; but, unhappily, Mrs. Knaggs's bedroom was only two floors higher, and it also looked out on the back; and Mrs. Knaggs herself was in her room and near her window when the report startled her, and not less because she little dreamt what it was until she looked out in time to see a cloud of smoke escaping from the schoolroom window, and Pocket examining the target, weapon in hand.

There was a great scene about it. Mrs. Knaggs [pg 19] shrieked a prohibition from aloft, and having pacified an incoherent cook upon the stairs, descended to extract a solemn promise which might well have ended the matter. Pocket was very contrite, indeed, drew his weapon's teeth with a promptitude that might have been his death, and offered it and them to be placed under lock and key until he left. But Mrs. Knaggs contented herself with promoting a solemn promise into a Sacred Word of Honour—which rather hurt poor Pocket—and with sending him a very straight message by Vivian after supper.

“The mater's awfully sorry,” said Vivian, returning from a mission which Pocket had been obliged to instigate after all. “There's not a spare bed in the house.”

Guy incontinently declared there was. A fraternal frown alone prevented him from going into particulars.

“A sofa would do me all right,” suggested Pocket, who had long ago lost his last train, and would have preferred a bare plank where there were boys to fussy old Miss Harbottle's best bed. But Vivian Knaggs shook his head.

“The mater says she couldn't sleep with firearms in the house.”

“I'll bury them in the garden if she likes.”

“Then you smoke in the night, and at Coverley's you once walked in your sleep,” pursued Vivian, [pg 20] who certainly seemed to have been urging the interloper's cause. “And the mater's afraid you might walk out of a window or set the house on fire.”

“I shouldn't do either to-night,” protested Pocket, with a grin. “I've not got anything to smoke, and I have got something to keep me quiet.”

And with further information on both points the son of the house went upstairs again, only to return in quicker time with a more embarrassed gravity.

“She's awfully sorry,” he said unconvincingly, “but she can't undertake the responsibility of putting you up with your asthma.”

Oddly enough, for he was only too sensitive on some points, Pocket was not really hurt by his treatment at the hands of these people; he felt he had made rather a mistake, but not that he had been most inhumanly cast adrift at sixteen among the shoals and quicksands of London. Nor was this quite the case as yet; there was still old Miss Harbottle in Wellington Road. But to her he was not going until decency compelled him; he was going to have another game of bagatelle with Guy Knaggs first. It will be

seen that with all his sensibilities the youngest Upton was a most casual and sanguine youth. He took a great deal for granted, prepared only for the best, and although inclined to worry over the irrevocable, took no thought for the morrow until he was obliged. He was sorry he had been so [pg 21] positive with Spearman on the subject of his friend's hospitality. He was sorry he had asked and been refused, rather sorry he had not caught that last train back from St. Pancras. Yet he left poor Miss Harbottle the best part of another hour to go to bed in; and that was neither the first nor the last of his erratic proceedings.

“What about your luggage?” asked the elder Knaggs, as he put on his hat to walk round with Pocket.

“Good Lord!” cried that worthy, standing still in the hall.

“Haven't you got any?”

“I left it at Madame Tussaud's!”

“Left your luggage there?”

“It was only a handbag. How long are they open?”

Young Knaggs looked in *Whitaker* and said they closed at ten. There was still time to recover the bag with a taxicab, but in that case it was not much use his going too. So they said goodbye at the Swiss Cottage, and the adventures of Pocket Upton began in earnest.

Old Miss Harbottle, his mother's great friend, would have none of him either! He stopped on the way to Baker Street to make sure. The garden gate was one that only opened by a catch and a cable manipulated indoors. The downstairs lights [pg 22] were out. The gate opened at last, a light shone through the front door, and the door opened a few inches on the chain. Pocket confronted a crevice of quilted

dressing-gown and grey curls; but his mother's friend's mastiff was making night so hideous within, and trying so hard to get at his mother's son, that it was some time before he could exchange an intelligible word with the brute's mistress. It was not a satisfactory interchange then, for Miss Harbottle at first flatly refused to believe that this was Tony Upton, whom she had not seen since his preparatory schooldays, and she seemed inclined to doubt it to the end. Upton or no Upton, she could not take him in. She had no sheets aired, no fire to air them at, and the cook had just left. Miss Harbottle's cook had always just left, except when she was just leaving. The rejected visitor got an instant's fun out of the reflection as he returned to his palpitating taxicab.

His position was now quite serious. He had not many shillings in his purse. The only thing to do was to put up at Shaw's Hotel, Trafalgar Square; that was where his people always stayed, where every servant was supposed to know them all. He pushed on at once through the cool June night, and paid away three of his last shillings for the drive. Alas! not a bed to be had at Shaw's; it was the worst time of the year, they told him, and he [pg 23] supposed they meant the best. He also supposed there had been changes in the staff, for nobody seemed to know his name as well as he had been led to expect at home.

They were quite nice about it. They pointed out the big hotels opposite, and recommended more than one of the little ones in Craven Street. But the big hotels were all full to overflowing; and at the only little one he tried the boy lost his temper like a man on being requested to deposit six

shillings before proceeding to his room. Pocket had not got it to deposit, and the galling reflection caused him to construe the demand as a deliberate reflection upon his outward respectability—as if he could not have borrowed the money from Dr. Bompas in the morning!

“I'll see you blowed,” was his muttered reply, and he caught up his bag in a passion.

“All right, little man! I shouldn't be rude about it,” said the dapper cashier. “If I couldn't pay my shot I should sleep in the Park, on a nice fine night like this.”

“I shall!” shouted Pocket through his teeth, as though that would prevent the brute of a cashier from sleeping soundly in his bed. And it was his own idle and childish threat that set him presently wondering what else he was to do. He had the spirit of adventure, as we have seen.

[pg 24]

He had the timorous, or let us say, the imaginative temperament, which lends to adventure its very salt. He wished to have done dangerous or heroic things, if not to have to do them. He had so little to boast about; his brothers, and so many other fellows of his own age, had so much. It would make a great yarn some day, how he had come up from school to see a doctor—and slept in the Park!

Meanwhile he had only a vague idea of his way there; he knew hardly anything of London except St. John's Wood and his present landmark of the Nelson column and the Landseer lions. He knew them from having stayed some time (under another doctor) as a child at Shaw's Hotel. But, I say! What would Bompas say to his sleeping out, and what sort of night could he expect in the open air?

He had an overcoat. It had been in his way all day; it would come in more than handy for the night. And it suddenly struck Pocket, with all the force of a forgotten novelty, that he had a revolver and cartridges as well.

That decided him. Not that he seriously thought himself the kind of person to use a revolver with resolution or effect; but it made him feel doughty and even truculent to find the means of heroic defence all ready to his hand. He began to plume himself on his providential purchase. He would sell his young life dearly if he fell among London thieves; [pg 25] in his death he would not be unhonoured at school or at home. Obituary phrases of a laudatory type sprang like tears to a mind still healthy enough to dash them away again, as though they had been real tears; but it was with all the nervous exaltation of the unsuspected desperado that he inquired his way of a colossal constable at the corner of Pall Mall and the Haymarket.

The man wanted to know if he meant Hyde Park Corner. “Yes,” said Pocket, hastily, because his heart was in his mouth and the policeman looked as though he had seen it there. And he overshot the mark in the motor omnibus through being ashamed to ask again, only alighting at Albert Gate; but here there was quite a little stream of decent people to follow without further tremors into the indubitable Park.

He followed them across the drive and across Rotten Row, gaining confidence as he went. In a minute it was all delightful; his eyes were turned outward by all there was to see; and now his chief fear was lest some one or other of the several passers should stand in his path and ask what

he was doing there. He was still afraid of speaking or being spoken to, but no longer unreasonably so. Detection as an escaped schoolboy was his one great dread; he felt he was doing something for which he might be expelled.
[pg 26]

But nobody took any notice of him; this gradually encouraged him to take more notice of other people, when he found, not altogether to his surprise, that the majority of those passing through the Park at that late hour were hardly of his own class. So much the more infinitesimal were the chances of his being recognised or even suspected for what he was. There were young men in straw hats, there were red-coated soldiers, and there were girls. They all filled the schoolboy with their fascinating possibilities. They were Life. The boy's heart beat at what he heard and saw. The couples were hilarious and unrefined. One wench, almost under his nose, gave her soldier a slap with such a remark as Pocket had never heard from a woman's lips before. He turned away, tingling, and leant upon the parapet of a bridge he had been in the act of crossing, and thought of school and home and Mr. Coverley.

It was not really a bridge at all. It was only the eastern extremity of the Serpentine; but as the boy leant over the stone balustrade, and gazed upon the artificial flood, broadening out indefinitely in the darkness, it might have been the noblest river in the world. Its banks were muffled in a feather boa of trees, bedizened by a chain of many lights; the lights of a real bridge made a diadem in the distance; and between these sped [pg 27] the lamps of invisible vehicles, like fretful fireflies. And the still water gave back every glimmer with its own brilliance,

unchallenged and undimmed by moon or star, for not a trace of either was in the sky; and yet it was the most wonderful sky the boy had ever seen—a black sky tinged with sullen rose, or a red sky seen through smoked glasses, he hardly knew which he would have called it. But he did know that warm and angry glow for the reflection of London's light and life; he could not forget he was in London for a moment. Her mighty machinery with its million wheels throbbed perpetually in his ears; and yet between the beats would come the quack of a wild duck near at hand, the splash of a leaping fish, the plaintive whistle of water-fowl: altogether such a chorus of incongruities as was not lost upon our very impressionable young vagabond. The booming strokes of eleven recalled him to a sense of time and his immediate needs. His great adventure was still before him; he pushed on, bag in hand, to select its scene. Another road he crossed, alive with the lamps of cyclists, and came presently upon a wide space intersected with broad footpaths from which he shrank; it was altogether too public here; he was approaching an exposed corner in an angle of lighted streets, with the Marble Arch at its apex, as a signboard made quite clear. He had come right across the Park; back over the [pg 28] grass, keeping rather more to the right, in the direction of those trees, was the best thing now.

It was here that he found the grass distinctly damp; this really was enough to deter an asthmatic, already beginning to feel asthmatical. Pocket Upton, however, belonged to the large class of people, weak and strong alike, who are more than loth to abandon a course of action once taken. It would

have required a very severe attack to baulk him of his night out and its subsequent description to electrified ears. But when bad steering had brought him up at the bandstand, the deserted chairs seemed an ordained compromise between prudence and audacity, and he had climbed into the fenced enclosure when another enormous policeman rose up horribly in its midst.

“What are you doing here?” inquired this policeman, striding upon Pocket with inexorable tread.

“No harm, I hope,” replied our hero humbly, but with unusual readiness.

“Nor no good either, I'll be bound!” said the policeman, standing over him.

“I was only going to sit down,” protested Pocket, having satisfied his conscience that in the first place that was all he really had been going to do.

“There are plenty of places to sit down,” rejoined the policeman. “You're not allowed in here. [pg 29] And unless you look sharp about it you won't have time to sit down at all.”

“Why not?”

“The Park closes at twelve.”

“Closes?”

“At twelve o'clock, and it's half-past eleven now.” The boy's heart sank into his wet boots. Here was an end of all his dashing plans. He was certain he had heard or read of people sleeping in the Park; he had looked upon it as a vast dormitory of the houseless; that was the only reason he was there. The offensive clerk in the hotel had evidently

entertained the same belief. This idiot of a policeman must be wrong. But he seemed quite clear about it.

“Did you think we were open all night?” he inquired with a grin.

“I did,” said Pocket; and he was inspired to add, “I even thought a lot of loafers used to sleep here all night!”

The policeman chuckled aloud.

“They may if they get up the trees; that's about their only chance,” said he.

“You search the whole place so thoroughly?”

“We keeps our eyes open,” said the policeman significantly, and Pocket asked no more questions; he scaled the forbidden fence and made off with the alacrity of one who meant to go out before he was [pg 30] put out. Such was his then sincere and sound intention. But where next to turn, to what seat on the Embankment, or what arch in the slums, in his ignorance of London he had no idea.

Meanwhile, to increase the irony of his dilemma, now that he was bent on quitting the Park he found himself striking deeper and deeper into its heart. He skirted a building, left it behind and out of sight, and drifted before the wind of destiny between an upright iron fence on one hand and a restricted open space upon the other. He could no longer see a single light; but the ground rose abruptly across the fence, and was thick with shrubs. Men might have been lying behind those shrubs, and Pocket could not possibly have seen them from the path. Did the policeman mean to tell him that he or his comrades were going to climb every fence and look behind every bush in Hyde Park?