

## CHAPTER L

### THE DESTROYER OF EVIDENCE

The boot became the centre of attraction, the cynosure of all eyes. Mr. Downing fixed it with the piercing stare of one who feels that his brain is tottering. The headmaster looked at it with a mildly puzzled expression. Psmith, putting up his eyeglass, gazed at it with a sort of affectionate interest, as if he were waiting for it to do a trick of some kind.

Mr. Downing was the first to break the silence.

"There was paint on this boot," he said vehemently. "I tell you there was a splash of red paint across the toe. Smith will bear me out in this. Smith, you saw the paint on this boot?"

"Paint, sir!"

"What! Do you mean to tell me that you did not see it?"

"No, sir. There was no paint on this boot."

"This is foolery. I saw it with my own eyes. It was a broad splash right across the toe."

The headmaster interposed.

"You must have made a mistake, Mr. Downing. There is certainly no trace of paint on this boot. These momentary optical delusions are, I fancy, not uncommon. Any doctor will tell you----"

"I had an aunt, sir," said Psmith chattily, "who was remarkably subject----"

"It is absurd. I cannot have been mistaken," said Mr. Downing. "I am positively certain the toe of this boot was red when I found it."

"It is undoubtedly black now, Mr. Downing."

"A sort of chameleon boot," murmured Psmith.

The goaded housemaster turned on him.

"What did you say, Smith?"

"Did I speak, sir?" said Psmith, with the start of one coming suddenly out of a trance.

Mr. Downing looked searchingly at him.

"You had better be careful, Smith."

"Yes, sir."

"I strongly suspect you of having something to do with this."

"Really, Mr. Downing," said the headmaster, "that is surely improbable. Smith could scarcely have cleaned the boot on his way to my house. On one occasion I inadvertently spilt some paint on a shoe of my own. I can assure you that it does not brush off. It needs a very systematic cleaning before all traces are removed."

"Exactly, sir," said Psmith. "My theory, if I may----?"

"Certainly, Smith."

Psmith bowed courteously and proceeded.

"My theory, sir, is that Mr. Downing was deceived by the light and shade effects on the toe of the boot. The afternoon sun, streaming in through the window, must have shone on the boot in such a manner as to give it a momentary and fictitious aspect of redness. If Mr. Downing recollects, he did not look long at the boot. The picture on the retina of the eye, consequently, had not time to fade. I remember thinking myself, at the moment, that the boot appeared to have a certain reddish tint. The mistake----"

"Bah!" said Mr. Downing shortly.

"Well, really," said the headmaster, "it seems to me that that is the only explanation that will square with the facts. A boot that is really smeared with red paint does not become black of itself in the course of a few minutes."

"You are very right, sir," said Psmith with benevolent approval. "May I go now, sir? I am in the middle of a singularly impressive passage of Cicero's speech De Senectute."

"I am sorry that you should leave your preparation till Sunday, Smith. It is a habit of which I altogether disapprove."

"I am reading it, sir," said Psmith, with simple dignity, "for pleasure. Shall I take the boot with me, sir?"

"If Mr. Downing does not want it?"

The housemaster passed the fraudulent piece of evidence to Psmith without a word, and the latter, having included both masters in a kindly smile, left the garden.

Pedestrians who had the good fortune to be passing along the road between the housemaster's house and Mr. Outwood's at that moment saw

what, if they had but known it, was a most unusual sight, the spectacle of Psmith running. Psmith's usual mode of progression was a dignified walk. He believed in the contemplative style rather than the hustling.

On this occasion, however, reckless of possible injuries to the crease of his trousers, he raced down the road, and turning in at Outwood's gate, bounded upstairs like a highly trained professional athlete.

On arriving at the study, his first act was to remove a boot from the top of the pile in the basket, place it in the small cupboard under the bookshelf, and lock the cupboard. Then he flung himself into a chair and panted.

"Brain," he said to himself approvingly, "is what one chiefly needs in matters of this kind. Without brain, where are we? In the soup, every time. The next development will be when Comrade Downing thinks it over, and is struck with the brilliant idea that it's just possible that the boot he gave me to carry and the boot I did carry were not one boot but two boots. Meanwhile----"

He dragged up another chair for his feet and picked up his novel.

He had not been reading long when there was a footstep in the passage, and Mr. Downing appeared.

The possibility, in fact the probability, of Psmith having substituted another boot for the one with the incriminating splash of paint on it had occurred to him almost immediately on leaving the headmaster's garden. Psmith and Mike, he reflected, were friends. Psmith's impulse would be to do all that lay in his power to shield Mike. Feeling aggrieved with himself that he had not thought of this before, he, too, hurried over to Outwood's.

Mr. Downing was brisk and peremptory.

"I wish to look at these boots again," he said. Psmith, with a sigh, laid down his novel, and rose to assist him.

"Sit down, Smith," said the housemaster. "I can manage without your help."

Psmith sat down again, carefully tucking up the knees of his trousers, and watched him with silent interest through his eyeglass.

The scrutiny irritated Mr. Downing.

"Put that thing away, Smith," he said.

"That thing, sir?"

"Yes, that ridiculous glass. Put it away."

"Why, sir?"

"Why! Because I tell you to do so."

"I guessed that that was the reason, sir," sighed Psmith replacing the eyeglass in his waistcoat pocket. He rested his elbows on his knees, and his chin on his hands, and resumed his contemplative inspection of the boot-expert, who, after fidgeting for a few moments, lodged another complaint.

"Don't sit there staring at me, Smith."

"I was interested in what you were doing, sir."

"Never mind. Don't stare at me in that idiotic way."

"May I read, sir?" asked Psmith, patiently.

"Yes, read if you like."

"Thank you, sir."

Psmith took up his book again, and Mr. Downing, now thoroughly irritated, pursued his investigations in the boot-basket.

He went through it twice, but each time without success. After the second search, he stood up, and looked wildly round the room. He was as certain as he could be of anything that the missing piece of evidence was somewhere in the study. It was no use asking Psmith point-blank where it was, for Psmith's ability to parry dangerous questions with evasive answers was quite out of the common.

His eye roamed about the room. There was very little cover there, even for so small a fugitive as a number nine boot. The floor could be acquitted, on sight, of harbouring the quarry.

Then he caught sight of the cupboard, and something seemed to tell him that there was the place to look.

"Smith!" he said.

Psmith had been reading placidly all the while.

"Yes, sir?"

"What is in this cupboard?"

"That cupboard, sir?"

"Yes. This cupboard." Mr. Downing rapped the door irritably.



"Just a few odd trifles, sir. We do not often use it. A ball of string, perhaps. Possibly an old note-book. Nothing of value or interest."

"Open it."

"I think you will find that it is locked, sir."

"Unlock it."

"But where is the key, sir?"

"Have you not got the key?"

"If the key is not in the lock, sir, you may depend upon it that it will take a long search to find it."

"Where did you see it last?"

"It was in the lock yesterday morning. Jackson might have taken it."

"Where is Jackson?"

"Out in the field somewhere, sir."

Mr. Downing thought for a moment.

"I don't believe a word of it," he said shortly. "I have my reasons for thinking that you are deliberately keeping the contents of that cupboard from me. I shall break open the door."

Psmith got up.

"I'm afraid you mustn't do that, sir."

Mr. Downing stared, amazed.

"Are you aware whom you are talking to, Smith?" he inquired acidly.

"Yes, sir. And I know it's not Mr. Outwood, to whom that cupboard happens to belong. If you wish to break it open, you must get his permission. He is the sole lessee and proprietor of that cupboard. I am only the acting manager."

Mr. Downing paused. He also reflected. Mr. Outwood in the general rule did not count much in the scheme of things, but possibly there were limits to the treating of him as if he did not exist. To enter his house without his permission and search it to a certain extent was all very well. But when it came to breaking up his furniture, perhaps----!

On the other hand, there was the maddening thought that if he left the study in search of Mr. Outwood, in order to obtain his sanction

for the house-breaking work which he proposed to carry through, Smith would be alone in the room. And he knew that, if Smith were left alone in the room, he would instantly remove the boot to some other hiding-place. He thoroughly disbelieved the story of the lost key. He was perfectly convinced that the missing boot was in the cupboard.

He stood chewing these thoughts for awhile, Psmith in the meantime standing in a graceful attitude in front of the cupboard, staring into vacancy.

Then he was seized with a happy idea. Why should he leave the room at all? If he sent Smith, then he himself could wait and make certain that the cupboard was not tampered with.

"Smith," he said, "go and find Mr. Outwood, and ask him to be good enough to come here for a moment."