

CHAPTER LII

ON THE TRAIL AGAIN

The most massive minds are apt to forget things at times. The most adroit plotters make their little mistakes. Psmith was no exception to the rule. He made the mistake of not telling Mike of the afternoon's happenings.

It was not altogether forgetfulness. Psmith was one of those people who like to carry through their operations entirely by themselves. Where there is only one in a secret the secret is more liable to remain unrevealed. There was nothing, he thought, to be gained from telling Mike. He forgot what the consequences might be if he did not.

So Psmith kept his own counsel, with the result that Mike went over to school on the Monday morning in pumps.

Edmund, summoned from the hinterland of the house to give his opinion why only one of Mike's boots was to be found, had no views on the subject. He seemed to look on it as one of those things which no fellow can understand.

"'Ere's one of 'em, Mr. Jackson," he said, as if he hoped that Mike might be satisfied with a compromise.

"One? What's the good of that, Edmund, you chump? I can't go over to school in one boot."

Edmund turned this over in his mind, and then said, "No, sir," as much as to say, "I may have lost a boot, but, thank goodness, I can still understand sound reasoning."

"Well, what am I to do? Where is the other boot?"

"Don't know, Mr. Jackson," replied Edmund to both questions.

"Well, I mean--Oh, dash it, there's the bell."

And Mike sprinted off in the pumps he stood in.

It is only a deviation from those ordinary rules of school life, which one observes naturally and without thinking, that enables one to realise how strong public-school prejudices really are. At a school, for instance, where the regulations say that coats only of black or dark blue are to be worn, a boy who appears one day in even the most respectable and unostentatious brown finds himself looked on with a mixture of awe and repulsion, which would be excessive if he had sand-bagged the headmaster. So in the case of boots. School rules decree that a boy shall go to his form-room in boots, There is no real reason why, if the day is fine, he should not wear shoes, should he

prefer them. But, if he does, the thing creates a perfect sensation. Boys say, "Great Scott, what have you got on?" Masters say, "Jones, what are you wearing on your feet?" In the few minutes which elapse between the assembling of the form for call-over and the arrival of the form-master, some wag is sure either to stamp on the shoes, accompanying the act with some satirical remark, or else to pull one of them off, and inaugurate an impromptu game of football with it. There was once a boy who went to school one morning in elastic-sided boots....

Mike had always been coldly distant in his relations to the rest of his form, looking on them, with a few exceptions, as worms; and the form, since his innings against Downing's on the Friday, had regarded Mike with respect. So that he escaped the ragging he would have had to undergo at Wrykyn in similar circumstances. It was only Mr. Downing who gave trouble.

There is a sort of instinct which enables some masters to tell when a boy in their form is wearing shoes instead of boots, just as people who dislike cats always know when one is in a room with them. They cannot see it, but they feel it in their bones.

Mr. Downing was perhaps the most bigoted anti-shoeist in the whole list of English schoolmasters. He waged war remorselessly against shoes. Satire, abuse, lines, detention--every weapon was employed by him in dealing with their wearers. It had been the late Dunster's

practice always to go over to school in shoes when, as he usually did, he felt shaky in the morning's lesson. Mr. Downing always detected him in the first five minutes, and that meant a lecture of anything from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour on Untidy Habits and Boys Who Looked like Loafers--which broke the back of the morning's work nicely. On one occasion, when a particularly tricky bit of Livy was on the bill of fare, Dunster had entered the form-room in heel-less Turkish bath-slippers, of a vivid crimson; and the subsequent proceedings, including his journey over to the house to change the heel-less atrocities, had seen him through very nearly to the quarter to eleven interval.

Mike, accordingly, had not been in his place for three minutes when Mr. Downing, stiffening like a pointer, called his name.

"Yes, sir?" said Mike.

"What are you wearing on your feet, Jackson?"

"Pumps, sir."

"You are wearing pumps? Are you not aware that PUMPS are not the proper things to come to school in? Why are you wearing PUMPS?"

The form, leaning back against the next row of desks, settled itself comfortably for the address from the throne.

"I have lost one of my boots, sir."

A kind of gulp escaped from Mr. Downing's lips. He stared at Mike for a moment in silence. Then, turning to Stone, he told him to start translating.

Stone, who had been expecting at least ten minutes' respite, was taken unawares. When he found the place in his book and began to construe, he floundered hopelessly. But, to his growing surprise and satisfaction, the form-master appeared to notice nothing wrong. He said "Yes, yes," mechanically, and finally "That will do," whereupon Stone resumed his seat with the feeling that the age of miracles had returned.

Mr. Downing's mind was in a whirl. His case was complete. Mike's appearance in shoes, with the explanation that he had lost a boot, completed the chain. As Columbus must have felt when his ship ran into harbour, and the first American interviewer, jumping on board, said, "Wal, sir, and what are your impressions of our glorious country?" so did Mr. Downing feel at that moment.

When the bell rang at a quarter to eleven, he gathered up his gown, and sped to the headmaster.