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Opening extract from
An Eagle in the Snow

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PART ONE

THE 11.50 TO LONDON

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The train was still in the station, and I was wondering if we'd ever get going. I was with my ma. I was tired. My arm was hurting and itching at the same time, inside the plaster. I remember she was already at her knitting, her knitting needles tick-tacking away, automatically, effortlessly. Whenever she sat down, Ma

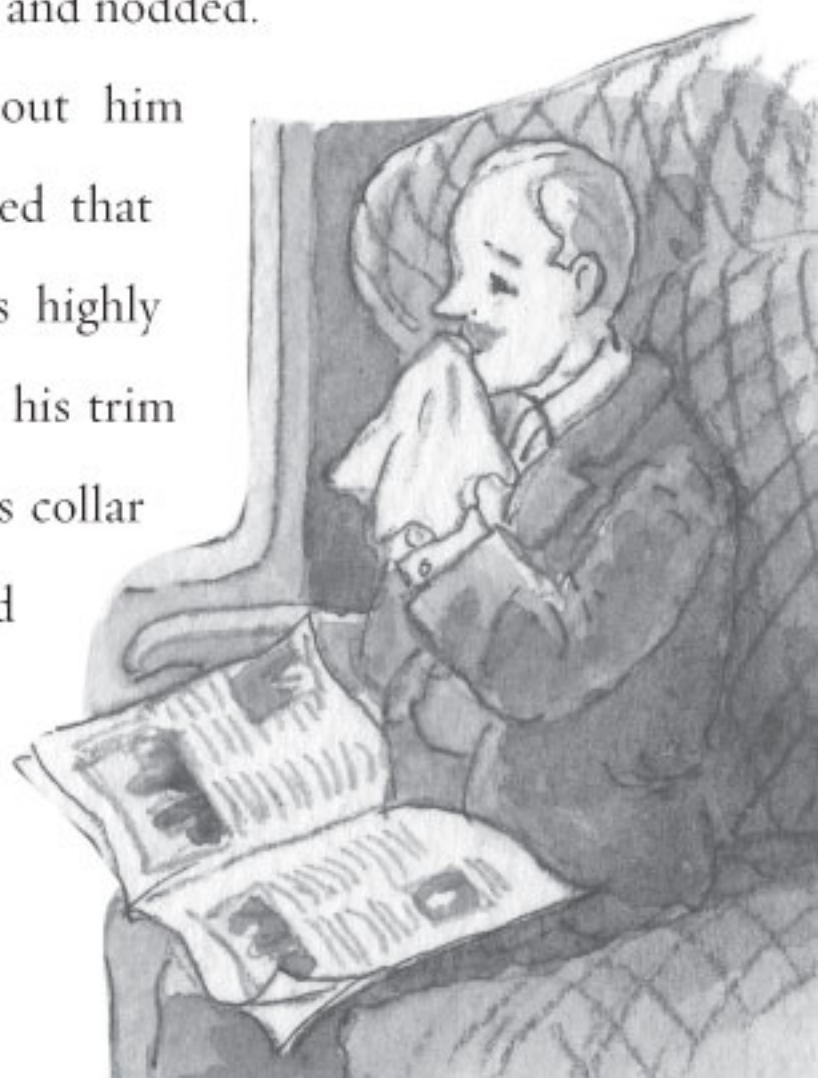
would always be knitting. Socks for Dad, this time.

“This train’s late leaving,” Ma said. “Wonder what’s up? That clock on the platform says it’s well past twelve already. Still, not hardly surprising, I suppose, under the circumstances.” Then she said something that surprised me. “If I drop off to sleep, Barney,” she told me, “just you keep your eye on that suitcase, d’you hear? All we got in this world is up there in that luggage rack, and I don’t want no one pinching it.”

I was just thinking that was quite a strange thing to say, because there was no one else in the carriage except the two of us, when the door opened and a man got in, slamming

the door behind him. He never said a word to us, hardly even acknowledged we were there, but took off his hat, put it up on the rack beside our suitcase, and then settled himself into the seat opposite. He looked at his watch and opened up his paper, his face disappearing behind it for a while. He had to put it down to blow his nose, which was when he caught me staring at him, and nodded.

Everything about him was neat, I noticed that at once, from his highly polished shoes, to his trim moustache and his collar and tie. I decided right away that



he didn't look like the sort of man who would pinch Ma's suitcase. There was also something about him that I thought I recognised; I had the feeling I might have seen him before. Maybe I hadn't. Maybe it was just because he seemed about the same age as Grandpa, with the same searching look in his eye.

But this stranger was neat, and there was nothing neat about my grandpa. My grandpa was a scarecrow, with his hair always tousled – what there was of it – his hands and face grimy from delivering his coal, and that was after he had washed. This stranger had clean hands, and clean nails too, as well looked after as the rest of him.

“Hope I pass inspection, son,” he said,

eyeing me meaningfully.

Ma nudged me, and apologised for my rudeness, before she turned on me. “How many times have I told you not to stare at people, Barney? Say sorry to the gentleman now.”

“Don’t you worry, missus,” he said. “Boys will be boys. I was one once myself, a while ago now, but I was.” Then, after a moment or two, he went on: “S’cuse me, missus, but this is the London train, isn’t it? The 11.50, right?”

“Hope so,” said Ma, nudging me again because I was still staring. I couldn’t help myself. The Station Master came past our window then, waving his green flag, blowing his whistle, his cheeks puffed out so that his





face looked entirely round, like a pink balloon, I thought. Then we were off, the train chuffing itself, wearily, reluctantly, into slow motion.

“Bout time,” said Ma.

“Do you mind if I let in a bit of air, missus?” the stranger asked. “I like a bit of air.”

“Help yourself,” Ma told him. “It’s free.”

He got up, let the window down a couple of notches on the leather strap, and then sat down. He caught my eye again, but this time he smiled at me. So I smiled back.

“Nine, are you?” he asked me.