Opening extract from

A Dog So Small

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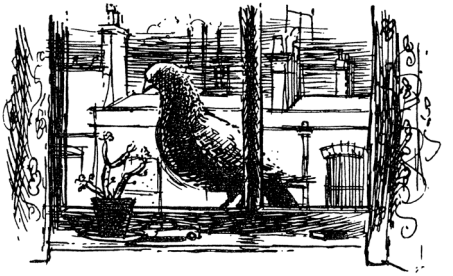

CHAPTER ONE

Early on a Birthday

THE TAPPING on the window woke him. He was fast asleep, and then wide awake because of the tapping. Perhaps the pigeon always began as early in the morning as this, for it was certainly always tapping when the boys woke. But that was usually much later, with full daylight and with the smell of breakfast-cooking coming from downstairs.

Cold, scentless, dim was the early morning, and Paul and Frankie still lay sleeping. But Ben had woken at once, and at once he could

not stay in bed a moment longer. He got out and went to the window. 'Pij,' he said softly through the glass; but the pigeon knew that this was not the boy who gave the food, and moved doubtfully off to the edge of the windowsill. The sill was always white with pigeon-droppings, so that Ben's mother – who did not know of the daily feeding – said that the bird was an obstinate creature that did not know when it was not wanted; but it did.

The sky was a dirty pinky-yellow where dawn over London fought with the tired light of thousands of street lamps. The birds were awake – pigeons, sparrows, starlings; but nobody was in the street. It lay empty for Ben; and he could not wait a moment later in bed – in the bedroom – in the house. With action he must fill the space between now and breakfast time, when the post came.

He dressed quickly and left the bedroom. The other two were still sleeping, and the pigeon had resumed its tapping. He crept out

on to the landing. His parents were still asleep: his father snoring, his mother silent. As soon as Mrs Blewitt woke, she would begin a little rattle of cups, saucers, teaspoons, tea-caddy, teapot, and electric kettle. When the tea was made, she shook her husband awake. And when his snores had ceased to buzz through the house, you knew that the Blewitt family had really started its day.

Ben passed his parents' door, and then his sisters' – more warily. May was talking to Dilys. May was still half asleep, and Dilys three-quarters, but that did not matter in their kind of conversation. May, the eldest of the family, was going to marry Charlie Forrester early next year, and Dilys, very close to her in age, was going to be her bridesmaid. So they talked of weddings, and wedding presents, and setting up house with a three-piece suite and curtains with pelmets and a washing machine . . .'And a wedding like a newspaper photograph, with a bridesmaid and a page,'

said May, going back to her favourite beginning. Ben was tiptoeing so carefully – so slowly, that he had to eavesdrop. They spoke of the prettiness of a pageboy to carry the bridal train; and they wondered if Frankie, being really still only a little boy – although not really pretty any longer, and he might need some careful persuading to the idea . . .

Frankie? Ben's eyebrows went up; but it was none of his business, this morning of all mornings. He tiptoed on, down the stairs and out of the house. He closed the front door behind him with care, and then said quite loudly, 'It's my birthday.' The pigeon came to the edge of its sill for a moment, to look down at him, nonplussed. 'Ah,' said Ben, looking up towards it, 'you just wait and see.'

He said no more, even to Paul's pigeon, even in this empty street, and even so near to the time of his birthday post. His grandfather Fitch had promised him – well, as good as promised him – a dog for his birthday. That

was some time ago, when Ben had been on a visit to his grandparents. Grandpa had been watching him play with their dog, Young Tilly, and had suddenly said, 'What about a dog of your own, boy – for your birthday, say, when that comes round?' He had spoken from behind his gnarled hand, because Granny was there, and she missed little. She disapproved of dogs, even of Till. So Ben had only breathed his 'Yes' to his grandfather, and Mr Fitch had nodded in reply. But surely that had been enough.

Grandpa would have to tell Granny in the end, of course, to get her agreement; and then he would have to get hold of just the right kind of dog. There might be delay, for there would be need of delicacy and discretion. All this Ben had understood, and he did not alarm himself that his dog was not mentioned in the weekly letters to his mother. Grandpa wrote the letters at Granny's dictation. She would have written them herself, but she had arthritis

and could not use a pen properly. So Grandpa wrote for her, very slowly and crabbedly. Granny told him what to say, first of all about the weather and then about the rest of the family. Old Mr and Mrs Fitch had six surviving children, besides Mrs Blewitt, and all grown up and married and with children of their own. By the time Granny had finished with news of them, there was no room for talk about dogs. Moreover, Grandpa hated writing and by the end of each letter his fingers were cramped and exhausted with the effort of holding and subduing the pen. All this Ben told himself reassuringly, having faith that his grandfather would neither forget a promise nor break it.

For months now, Ben had been thinking of dogs. As long as you hadn't been given any one kind of dog, you had a choice of the whole lot. Ben had not bothered to be reasonable in his imagining. He had had Alsatians, Great Danes, mastiffs, bloodhounds, borzois . . . He

had picked and chosen the biggest and best from the dog books in the Public Library.

This morning Ben was making for the River – some way from his home, but worth the walk. Looking over the parapet, you had the only really extensive view possible in this part of London, and that was the kind of view you needed when you were thinking of a really big dog.

He turned out of his side street into another and then into a main road. There was very little traffic yet, and he made the street crossings easily, with only a brisk, almost absent-minded look in both directions. Already his mind was leaving London in the early morning for Dartmoor at night. Over that wild, nocturnal waste the hound of the Baskervilles was silhouetted against a full moon low in the sky. The dog's spectral eyes dwelt upon the figure of Sherlock Holmes . . .

But a boy couldn't *do* much with a bloodhound, unless there were criminals

loose. Not a bloodhound then, this morning. The road along which Ben was trotting rounded a bend and came within sight of the bridge over the River. This was the point at which the Blewitt family still sometimes revived the old, old joke about Ben's littleness. If he grew to be six foot high, Ben sometimes thought, they would still make that joke. For from the other side of the bridge towered up Big Ben.

Ben Blewitt was still thinking of his dog. An Irish wolfhound perhaps – but they looked so unkempt and terribly sad in the photographs in the dog books. If he were dealing with wolves, he would really prefer a borzoi . . .

The traffic crossing the bridge into central London had been very slightly increasing all the time, and the number of pedestrians. Ben was outpaced by a man in a bowler hat and dark suit, carrying a briefcase. He had walked from Tooting and was going to his office in the City, where he liked to be at his desk by

half past eight in the morning. He did this every morning – he was not a married man.

He passed Ben on the bridge, and went on to his work; but Ben stayed in the middle. He laid his elbows along the parapet and gazed over that amazing length and width of water, here in the heart of London. The only buildings to interrupt the expanse were the bridges, and they put only their feet into the water as they strode across.

This was what he had come for. The expanse of the River reminded him conveniently of the enormous expanses of Russia, the home of the borzoi. At school Ben learnt about Russia – what Russians choose to eat for breakfast and what agricultural implements and crops they use on which soils; he wasn't very much interested. His father read about Russia in the newspaper, and thumped the table as he read. Paul and Frankie read about Russian space-travel. But Ben's Russia was different from all this. For one thing, his country was

always under deep and dazzling snow. The land was a level and endless white, with here and there a dark forest where wolves crouched in the daytime, to come out at night, howling and ravening. For Ben, it was daytime in Russia. Sleighs had been driven out into the snow, and left. Each sleigh was covered with a white woollen blanket to match the snow. Beneath the blanket – but wait: already men on horseback were beating the nearby forest. Wolves came out. They were rushing past the sleighs. Men concealed in the sleighs threw back the blankets and, at the same time, unleashed their coupled borzoi dogs. Magnificent, magnificent beasts! They leapt forward after the wolves.

The wolves were fast, but the borzois had greyhound bodies, their whole bodies were thin, delicately made, streamlined for speed. The wolves were fierce, but the borzois were brave and strong. They caught up with the wolves: one borzoi on each side of a wolf

caught it and held it until the huntsman came up with his dagger –

At this point Ben always stopped, because, although you couldn't have wolves, he wasn't so keen on killing them either. Anyway, from the far side of the bridge the moon-face of Big Ben suddenly spoke to him and said half past seven. The wolf-hunt with borzois had taken a long time. Ben Blewitt turned back from the River to go home to breakfast.

He broke into a run as he realized that the morning post would have arrived.