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opening extract from

Emil and the Detectives

written by

Erich Kästner

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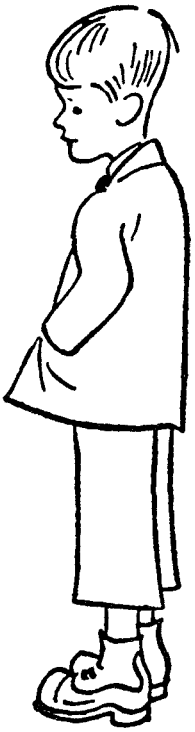

Emil in his Sunday suit

Here is Emil, in his dark blue Sunday suit. He hates wearing it, and only puts it on when he has to. Navy blue spots so easily. When that happens his mother damps a clothes brush and rubs and scrubs for all she is worth, holding Emil against her knee, and says, "I can't afford to buy you another suit, you know." That reminds him how hard she works to provide for them both, and to send him to a good school.

Introduction

To keep Emil from his friend the reader for a single moment is a dull thing to do. But if anybody has a right to do it, it would be someone who has read his story over and over in the German in which it was originally written, and who knows a good deal about the very latest books written for boys (and girls). That I cannot claim. None the less, the fact that a book is almost bound to be less good in any other language than its own, and yet that *Emil* seems so alive and alert and exciting in English, and also that it is as a story so much of a novelty to me, will perhaps

excuse my saying a word or two about it and about *him*.

I said, "alive"; and that is as true, I think, of everybody in the book as it is of the book itself. Erich Kästner has edged so completely into Emil's skin that we see and think through Emil's own eyes and mind, and yet at the same time we know a good deal more about him and what happens to him than he does himself. His story, too, is a story of today. There is nothing in it that *might* not happen (in pretty much the same way as it does happen in the book) in London or Manchester or Glasgow tomorrow afternoon. None the less, Emil is just like the youngest of the three brothers who goes out to seek his fortune in the old folk tales – and gets it, in spite of a mistake or two on the journey. In other words, it is a tale of adventure and romance.

The man in the bowler hat might be sitting in any corner of any railway carriage any fine

morning in England, and Emil (or Jack as his name would probably be) in the other. And yet, there is a difference! And though Emil is the hero of the piece, he is as much of a small boy at the end of the book as he was at the beginning – without a trace of the prig. I know of no other story, either, except possibly *The Pied Piper*, so populous with children, and with real children; and when they swarm round the man with the bowler hat like hornets in July, well, it is *then* that the honey is sweetest, though this may not be very good natural history.

The story proves too in its own headlong fashion that whenever, whatever or wherever you may find them, boys all the world over are first and foremost *boys* – e.g. Gustav, the "Professor", Traut, and the Major and "little Tuesday", and the rest – just as Grundeises are Grundeises!

As for Pony Hütchen, there is probably not a town in Europe, or America either, where

she is not to be seen flashing along on her brand new nickel-plated bicycle, and with as many sweethearts as there are spokes in its wheels.

At the last page it is to old friends that we say good-bye; Emil and his mother and his grandmother and all; even though, and quite rightly too, they wouldn't let themselves be used "for publicity purposes". That is one "moral". The other is as pleasant – all jam and no powder: "Money should always be sent by money order".

May Herr Erich Kästner flourish (both as an author and as one of his own characters), and if he will write another story about, say, little Tuesday, or little Wednesday for that matter, I feel sure there will soon be scores of Emils in England with their mouths wide open, eager to swallow it down.

Chapter 1

EMIL PREPARES FOR A JOURNEY

"Now then, Emil," Mrs Tischbein said, "just carry in that jug of hot water for me, will you." She picked up one jug and a little blue bowl of liquid camomile shampoo, and hurried out of the kitchen into the front room. Emil took his jug and followed her.

There was a woman sitting there with her head bent over a white wash-basin. Her long fair hair was loose and hung down like three hanks of wool over her face so that Emil could not see who it was. His mother poured

the shampoo over the woman's head, and asked, "Is that too hot?"

"No, that's all right," came the reply, and Mrs Tischbein rubbed it in until it made a foamy white mop all over the customer's head.

When he heard the voice, Emil exclaimed, "Why, it's Mrs Wirth!" She was the wife of the baker, and he knew her quite well. "Good morning, Mrs Wirth," he said, and put his jug down below the wash-basin.

"Well, Emil," she replied, and it sounded as though she was speaking through a mouthful of whipped cream. "I hear you're going to Berlin. You lucky boy!"

"He did not really want to go at first," said his mother, still rubbing. "But what is there for him to do here all through the holidays? Besides, he's never been to Berlin, though my sister Martha has asked us often enough. They're comfortably off, you know. Her husband's in the Post Office. I can't go with

Emil, worse luck! The holidays are just my busiest times. But he's big enough to travel alone now, and he can look after himself. My mother has promised to meet him at the station. She's going to wait for him by the flower stall."

"Oh he'll like Berlin, I'm sure of that," declared Mrs Wirth from the depths of the wash-basin. "It's just made for children. We went there the year before last for the skittle club outing. My word, but it's a noisy place! Do you know – some of the streets were as light at night as during the day. And the traffic! My, what a lot of cars!"

"Were there many foreign ones?" Emil asked quickly.

"I wouldn't know about that," Mrs Wirth returned with a shrug and a sudden sneeze caused by soap getting up her nose.

"Emil, you'd better go and get ready," said his mother. "I've laid out your good suit in the bedroom, and if you get dressed now we

"Is that too hot?"

Emil's father was a master plumber, but he died when Emil was five. So his mother became a hairdresser, trimming, washing, and setting the hair of all the mothers and girls in her neighbourhood. She has to do all the housework as well, of course, and the washing and cooking. She is very fond of Emil and glad she can earn enough money for them both. Sometimes she sings lively songs. Sometimes she's ill. Then Emil does the cooking. He can fry eggs, and steak and onions too.

can have dinner as soon as I've finished Mrs Wirth's hair."

"What shirt shall I wear?" he asked.

"You'll find everything there on the bed. Have a good wash first, and see you put your socks on right way out. You'll find a new pair of laces too, for your shoes. Run along now."

"Oh, all right," he said and took himself off.

When Mrs Wirth had looked in the mirror and satisfied herself that her hair had set perfectly, she went away too, and Mrs Tischbein went into the bedroom, where she found Emil looking very dejected.

"I wonder who invented Sunday suits," he muttered.

"Why?" she asked him.

"If I knew where he lived, I'd just about go out and shoot him, that's all."

"Dear, dear! What a hard life you have! And some children are just as miserable because they haven't got a Sunday suit. Oh

well, we all have our troubles. Oh, and before I forget, ask Aunt Martha to lend you a clothes-hanger this evening, and see you hang your suit up on it when you take it off – and give it a good brush first. You can put your old jersey on again tomorrow. It makes you look like a pirate, but that can't be helped. Now, what else is there to see to? Your suitcase is ready packed, and I've wrapped up the flowers for Auntie. I'll give you the money for Grandma when we've had dinner. Come on now, young man, let's go and eat," and she put her hand on his shoulder and pushed him in front of her towards the kitchen.

There was macaroni cheese with ham in it – Emil's favourite dish – and he tucked into it with gusto. Once or twice he glanced at his mother to see if she minded seeing him eat with such relish when he was just going away – but her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Send me a card as soon as you get there,"

she told him after a while. "I've put one ready, right at the top of the case."

"All right," Emil promised, removing a piece of macaroni from the knee of his trousers as unobtrusively as possible. Fortunately his mother didn't notice, but went on with her last-minute instructions.

"Give my love to them all," she told him. "And look after yourself. You'll find everything in Berlin very different from what you're accustomed to here in Neustadt. Uncle Robert said he'd take you to a museum on Sunday. Mind you behave nicely. I don't want anyone saying you've no manners."

"All right. I promise," said Emil.

After dinner they went together into the front room, where Mrs Tischbein took a tin box out of a cupboard and counted the money in it. She shook her head and counted again.

"Now who did I have yesterday after-

noon?" she wondered. "Do you remember, Emil?"

"Miss Thomas?" he suggested, "and Mrs Homburg."

"Yes, that's what I thought. But in that case, the money's short." She took out a cash book in which she kept her accounts and added up some figures. "Yes, eight shillings short," she said at last.

"The gasman called this morning," Emil reminded her.

"Ah, of course! That's it, and now I've eight shillings less than I'd reckoned on, worse luck." She gave a little whistle, as though to blow her troubles away, and took three notes out of the box.

"Look, Emil," she said, "here are seven pounds – one five-pound note and two one-pounds. Give six pounds to Grandma, and tell her not to be cross because I haven't sent any money lately. Tell her I've been very short myself, but to make up for that, you've

brought the money yourself, and I've made it a little more than usual, and give her a nice kiss from me. Can you remember all that? The other pound is for you. You'll need about ten shillings for your return fare, I think, so you must keep that. Offer to pay your share if you have any meals out, and keep a few shillings in your pocket in case anything turns up. Look, I'll put the notes in the envelope of Aunt Martha's letter. For goodness' sake don't lose it! Where had you better put it, I wonder?"

She placed the money in the used envelope, folded it down the middle and gave it to him.

Emil considered the matter and then tucked the little packet away in the bottom of the inner pocket on the right-hand side of his jacket. Then he patted the outside to make sure he could feel it.

"I don't see how it could get out of there!" he said comfortably.

"Well, don't go telling people in the train that you have such a lot of money on you."

"As if I would!" Emil protested indignantly.

Before putting the tin box back in the cupboard, Mrs Tischbein put some money from it into her own purse. Then she glanced rapidly through her sister's letter again to make sure of the times of the train by which Emil was to travel.

You may possibly be thinking that this is a lot of fuss to make about seven pounds. Well, perhaps it is, and people who earn a hundred or a thousand pounds a month certainly would not think twice about spending that amount. But, believe me, most people earn a great deal less than that, and to anyone who earns, say, thirty-five shillings a week, seven pounds seems a great deal of money to have saved. Plenty of people would think themselves millionaires if they had five pounds to spend, and in their wildest dreams

could not imagine anyone actually possessing a million pounds.

Emil's father was dead, so Mrs Tischbein had to work to keep herself and him. She had turned one of her rooms into a hairdresser's shop where she spent her days trimming, washing, and setting blonde heads and brunettes. She had not only to earn enough to pay the rent, the gas and coal bills, and to buy food and clothes for them both, but there were Emil's school fees as well, and the cost of his books. There were also times when she was not well, and had to have a doctor, and like as not he ordered her a bottle of medicine – and that had to be paid for too. Emil used to look after her at such times, and even did the cooking. He sometimes scrubbed the floor too while she was asleep, so that she should not try to get up before she ought for fear the house was going "to rack and ruin".

Well, now that you know all this, you shouldn't laugh at Emil for being rather a

good boy to his mother. He was very fond of her, and knew that she worked hard to get the things for him that all the other boys had. He would have felt pretty mean if he had not worked hard at his lessons, or if he cribbed from anyone else in class or played truant. That would have been letting her down, and he would have hated to do that. He hated to do anything that might distress her.

At the same time, Emil was not a prig. He was not even one of those unnaturally good children who seem to have been born old. He had to try really hard to be good, as hard as some people try to give up sweets, or going to the pictures. And sometimes he found it very difficult to stick to his guns. But it was wonderfully rewarding at the end of term when he was able to say that he was top of the class again. His mother was always so pleased, and showed it. And he felt it was something in return for all the things she did for him.

But to get back to the story . . .

"Goodness me, it's a quarter past one!" Mrs Tischbein cried. "Time we were off to the station. The train leaves just before two, you know."

"Come on then, Mrs Tischbein," said Emil, "and I'm going to carry the suitcase, make no mistake about that!"