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opening extract from

The Butterfly Lion

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THE BUTTERFLY LION

The Butterfly Lion grew from several magical roots: the memories of a small boy who tried to run away from school a long time ago; a book about a pride of white lions discovered by Chris McBride; a chance meeting in a lift with Virginia McKenna, actress and champion of lions and all creatures born free; a true story of a soldier of the First World War who rescued some circus animals in France from certain death; and the sighting from a train of a white horse carved out on a chalky hillside near Westbury in Wiltshire.

To Chris McBride, to Virginia McKenna and to Gina Pollinger – many, many thanks. And to you the reader – enjoy it!

MICHAEL MORPURGO

February 1996

Chilblains and Semolina Pudding

Butterflies live only short lives. They flower and flutter for just a few glorious weeks, and then they die. To see them, you have to be in the right place at the right time. And that's how it was when I saw the butterfly lion – I happened to be in just the right place, at just the right time. I didn't dream him. I didn't dream any of it. I saw him, blue and shimmering in the sun, one afternoon in June when I was young. A long time ago. But I don't forget. I mustn't forget. I promised them I wouldn't.

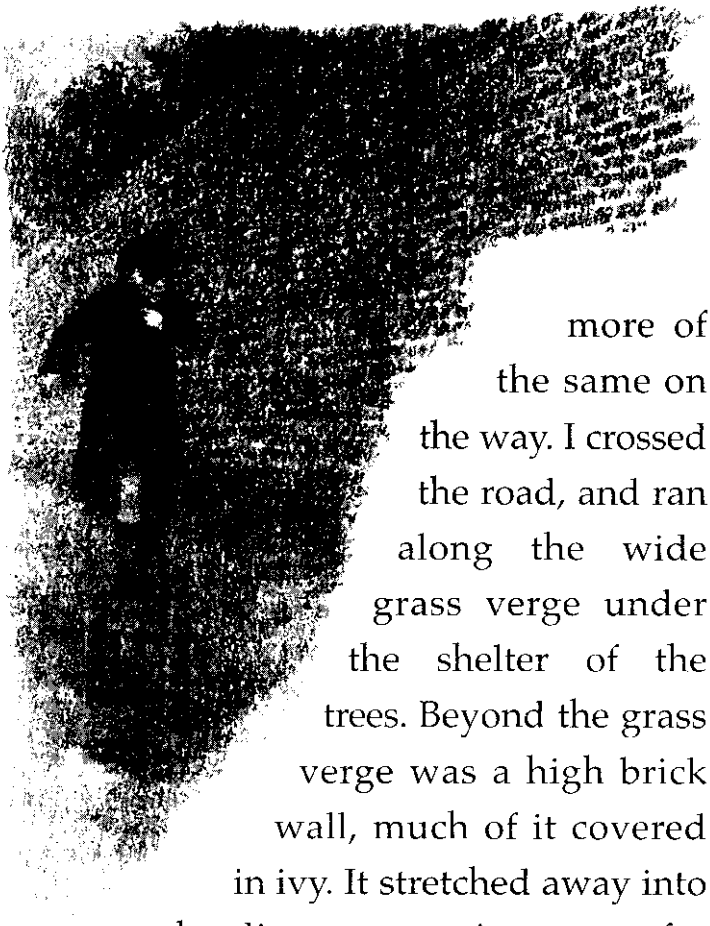
I was ten, and away at boarding school in deepest Wiltshire. I was far from home and I didn't want to be. It was a diet of Latin and stew and rugby and detentions and cross-country runs and chilblains and marks and squeaky beds and semolina pudding. And then there was Basher Beaumont who terrorised and tormented me, so that I lived every waking moment of my life in dread of him. I had often thought of running away, but only once ever plucked up the courage to do it.

I was homesick after a letter from my mother. Basher Beaumont had cornered me in the bootroom and smeared black shoe-polish in my hair. I had done badly in a spelling test, and Mr Carter had stood me in the corner with a book on my head all through the lesson – his favourite torture. I was more miserable than I had ever been before. I picked at

the plaster in the wall, and determined there and then that I would run away.

I took off the next Sunday afternoon. With any luck I wouldn't be missed till supper, and by that time I'd be home, home and free. I climbed the fence at the bottom of the school park, behind the trees where I couldn't be seen. Then I ran for it. I ran as if bloodhounds were after me, not stopping till I was through Innocents Breach and out onto the road beyond. I had my escape all planned. I would walk to the station – it was only five miles or so – and catch the train to London. Then I'd take the underground home. I'd just walk in and tell them that I was never, ever going back.

There wasn't much traffic, but all the same I turned up the collar of my raincoat so that no one could catch a glimpse of my uniform. It was beginning to rain now, those heavy hard drops that mean there's



more of the same on the way. I crossed the road, and ran along the wide grass verge under the shelter of the trees. Beyond the grass verge was a high brick wall, much of it covered in ivy. It stretched away into the distance, continuous as far as the eye could see, except for a massive arched gateway at the bend of the road. A great stone lion bestrode the gateway. As I came closer I could see he was roaring in the rain, his lip curled, his teeth bared.

I stopped and stared up at him for a moment. That was when I heard a car slowing down behind me. I did not think twice. I pushed open the iron gate, darted through, and flattened myself behind the stone pillar. I watched the car until it disappeared round the bend.

To be caught would mean a caning, four strokes, maybe six, across the back of the knees. Worse, I would be back at school, back to detentions, back to Basher Beaumont. To go along the road was dangerous, too dangerous. I would try to cut across country to the station. It would be longer that way, but far safer.

Strange Meeting

I was still deciding which direction to take when I heard a voice from behind me.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

I turned.

"Who are you?" she asked again. The old lady who stood before me was no bigger than I was. She scrutinised me from under the shadow of her dripping straw hat. She had piercing dark eyes that I did not want to look into.

"I didn't think it would rain," she said, her voice gentler. "Lost, are you?"

I said nothing. She had a dog on a leash at her side, a big dog. There was an

ominous growl in his throat, and his hackles were up all along his back.

She smiled. "The dog says you're on private property," she went on, pointing her stick at me accusingly. She edged aside my raincoat with the end of her stick. "Run away from that school, did you? Well, if it's anything like it used to be, I can't say I blame you. But we can't just stand here in the rain, can we? You'd better come inside. We'll give him some tea, shall we, Jack? Don't you worry about Jack. He's all bark and no bite." Looking at Jack, I found that hard to believe.

I don't know why, but I never for one moment thought of running off. I often wondered later why I went with her so readily. I think it was because she expected me to, willed me to somehow. I followed the old lady and her dog up to the house, which was huge, as huge as my school. It looked as if it had grown out of the ground.

There was hardly a brick or a stone or a tile to be seen. The entire building was smothered in red creeper, and there were a dozen ivy-clad chimneys sprouting skywards from the roof.

We sat down close to the stove in a vast vaulted kitchen. "The kitchen's always the warmest place," she said, opening the oven door. "We'll have you dry in no time. Scones?" she went on, bending down with some difficulty and reaching inside. "I always have scones on a Sunday. And tea to wash it down. All right for you?" She went on chatting away as she busied herself with the kettle and the teapot. The dog eyed me all the while from his basket, unblinking. "I was just thinking," she said. "You'll be the first young man I've had inside this house since Bertie." She was silent for a while.

The smell of the scones wafted through the kitchen. I ate three before I even touched my tea. They were sweet and crumbly,

and succulent with melting butter. She talked on merrily again, to me, to the dog – I wasn't sure which. I wasn't really listening. I was looking out of the window behind her. The sun was bursting through the clouds and lighting the hillside. A perfect rainbow arched through the sky. But miraculous though it was, it wasn't the rainbow that fascinated me. Somehow, the clouds were casting a strange shadow over the hillside, a

shadow the shape of a lion, roaring like the one over the archway.

"Sun's come out," said the old lady, offering me another scone. I took it eagerly. "Always does, you know. It may be difficult to remember sometimes, but there's always sun behind the clouds, and the clouds do go in the end. Honestly."

She watched me eat, a smile on her face that warmed me to the bone.

"Don't think I want you to go, because I don't. Nice to see a boy eat so well, nice to have the company; but all the same, I'd better get you back to school after you've had your tea, hadn't I? You'll only be in trouble otherwise. Mustn't run off, you know. You've got to stick it out, see things through, do what's got to be done, no matter what." She was looking out of the window as she spoke. "My Bertie taught me that, bless him, or maybe I taught him. I can't remember now." And

she went on talking and talking, but my mind was elsewhere again.

The lion on the hillside was still there, but now he was blue and shimmering in the sunlight. It was as if he were breathing, as if he were alive. It wasn't a shadow any more. No shadow is blue. "No, you're not seeing things," the old lady whispered. "It's not magic. He's real enough. He's our lion, Bertie's and mine. He's our butterfly lion."

"What d'you mean?" I asked.

She looked at me long and hard. "I'll tell you if you like," she said. "Would you like to know? Would you really like to know?"

I nodded.

"Have another scone first and another cup of tea. Then I'll take you to Africa where our lion came from, where my Bertie came from too. Bit of a story, I can tell you. You ever been to Africa?"

"No," I replied.

"Well, you're going," she said. "We're both going."

Suddenly I wasn't hungry any more. All I wanted now was to hear her story. She sat back in her chair, gazing out of the window. She told it slowly, thinking before each sentence; and all the while she never took her eyes off the butterfly lion. And neither did I.