

Excerpt from Chapter 4 of "Mr Skip" by Michael Morpurgo



The next morning, early, I went down to the lock-up in my dressing gown and fed Barnaby his hay. He ate like a horse. I just hoped he would run like one too. I came back afterwards and ate my own breakfast in silence, Mister Skip watching every mouthful of toast and strawberry jam as it went in. Mum tried her best to cheer me up, but it was no use. I could see it all in my mind. I could hear it all - all their prancing, dancing ponies tossing their heads at the start line, pawing the ground, then dashing off into the distance, the Crazy Cossacks' mocking laughter ringing in my ears, and me miles behind, barely able to get old Barnaby to walk.

Mum was at the fridge fetching some milk when, suddenly and quite definitely, Mister Skip began to chuckle. She turned round, so surprised that she nearly dropped the milk carton.

"What was that?" she said.

"My tummy, Mum," I said. "It's my tummy rumbling. Nerves. I'm awful nervous." The chuckling stopped, thank goodness, as Mum came back to the table.

"It'll be alright, Jackie," she said, stroking my hair. "Don't you worry yourself." Then she sat down and patted Mister Skip on his head. "I do love my birthday present. Always smiling he is, no matter what. It's almost like there's the three of us now, three of us against the world."

I knew it would make no difference, but before I took Barnaby out, I groomed him till he looked a little less like a dirty old carpet and a little bit more like a new one. I picked out his feet, brushed his tail, and stroked his ears - he always liked me to do that back at Gran's. The last thing I did inside the lock-up was to whisper into his ear: "Please, Barnaby. Just for once in your life, go fast, go like the wind. Please. Please."