

michael morpurgo

LITTLE MANFRED



ILLUSTRATED BY
MICHAEL FOREMAN



HarperCollins *Children's Books*



THE SEA WAS ten minutes away from the farm, no more. So there was hardly a day of my life that I didn't go down to the beach. It was my favourite place to escape to. Farm chores were definitely not my idea of fun – except bottle-feeding lambs or calves – but if there were sheds to muck out, and there always were, I'd make myself scarce, quick as a twick, and run off down to the beach.

LITTLE MANFRED

The trouble was, that as soon as he was old enough, Alex would always follow me. Alex was my little brother and he talked a lot. He was seven by this time; I was twelve and liked to do my thinking and my sulking on my own. But wherever I went he went, and wherever we went, Mannie came with us – that's Manfred, our black and white sheepdog. We'd go swimming in the sea in summer, all three of us.



Part One



We'd chase the gulls whenever we saw them ganging up on the oystercatchers; we'd skim stones if the sea was calm enough – twenty-six bounces was my record – Alex had only ever managed two! Whatever we did, wherever we went, the three of us were always together.

All our friends thought Manfred was a funny sort of a name for a dog. Apparently I'd called him after our toy dog, Little Manfred, a wooden dachshund, painted brown with red wheels. Mum had played with him when she was little. Then I'd had him to play with for a while, and now he belonged to Alex; only Alex wasn't that interested in him any more, mostly because he'd grown out of him, but also because Little

LITTLE MANFRED

Manfred only had three wheels by now, and didn't work very well. Dad had trodden on him the Christmas before, by accident of course. So Little Manfred was 'busted', and Alex never let Dad forget who'd done it. Dad was always saying he'd mend him, but he never did. So there Little Manfred had stood ever since Christmas, lopsided on the sitting-room windowsill, waiting for a new wheel.



Part One

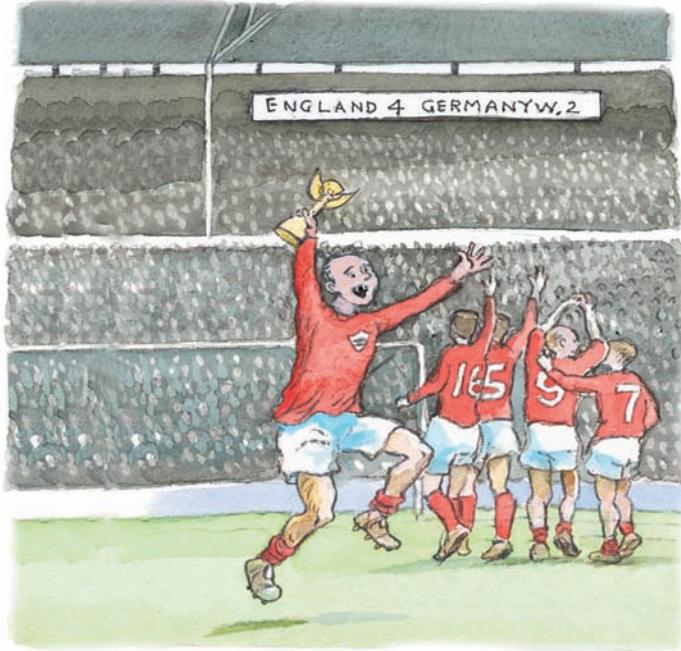


For some reason I never really understood, Little Manfred always seemed more important to Mum than to anyone else. She really cried when the accident happened. I don't think I'd ever seen her so upset. I'd see her looking at Little Manfred so sadly sometimes, stroking his back almost as if he were a real dog. And at Christmas after the accident, she tied a red ribbon round his neck, "to make him feel better," she said.

I didn't discover why she loved him so much or why he was called Little Manfred until one day in that summer of 1966.

I remember the exact day. It was the day after England won the World Cup at Wembley. Both Dad

LITTLE MANFRED



and Alex were football mad. Just about everyone in England was that summer, except Mum and me. We hated the fuss and ballyhoo, but all the same, I've got to say that I did quite like it when England won. I watched the game on the television with Dad and



Part One



Alex. Mum ignored the whole thing, she was just not interested.

Anyway, that next morning I was wandering along the beach with Alex. He had a football at his feet and kept replaying Geoff Hurst's last-minute goal over and over, dribbling the ball down the beach and then letting fly as he scored the goal yet again. Then he was Nobby Stiles, skipping along, holding the cup up high, his socks round his ankles. It made me laugh out loud watching him. And Mannie loved it too, barking his head off and then chasing after the ball wherever Alex kicked it.

It was a wild and blustery day with clouds scudding across the sky. I sat down and watched the



waves tumbling in towards the shore. Mannie was bored with football by now because Alex kept taking the ball away from him. Instead he was doing what he usually did, chasing everything that moved





– his tail first, then gulls, leaves and a paper bag that was flying low across the beach, just too high for him to catch. After a while he came running back to me. I knew what he was after. And I knew

LITTLE MANFRED

too that once I started the game it would go on for ever. He stood there looking at me adoringly, his eyes pleading with me. I gave in, just as he knew I would. I picked up a stick and threw it into the sea for him. Off he went and back he came, again and again and again.

I had just thrown the stick for the umpteenth time when a pair of oystercatchers flew up suddenly from behind me, out to sea, piping as they went. Something had alarmed them. Mannie was distracted from his game and dropped his stick, which was strange because he was as used to oystercatchers as I was – he didn't usually pay them any attention. His ears were pricked forward, his gaze fixed on



Part One



something higher up the beach. I thought at first it must be Alex's football. I could see it now. It had landed up there not far from the upturned rowing boat. But it wasn't the football that was bothering him. He had heard something. And I heard it too now, the sound of voices, men's voices. There was a growl in the back of Mannie's throat.

That was when I first saw the two men. They were coming down the track towards the rowing boat at the top of the beach. As they reached it they stood there for some moments, looking out to sea. One of them was carrying a walking stick, and had on a strange hat, with a feather in it; the other was much taller, and was wearing a duffel coat.





LITTLE MANFRED

They were arm in arm, and leaning into the wind. Mannie was barking at them by now. I told him to shut up and, to my surprise, he did exactly as I said. He came to sit close to me, his head against my leg for reassurance. Then Alex was beside me too.

“Who are they?” he whispered. The taller of the two had spotted Alex’s football by now and picked it up.

“Yours?” he called out.



Part One



The men looked a little older than Dad. City people, I thought – they had on muddied city shoes, not wellies. Alex nodded and put his finger in his mouth, which he always did when he was nervous.

“I’ll bring it down to you,” said the man. “Not so good at kicking these days.”

Then the one in the hat took the football off him. “*Nein, Nein*, Marty, I shall kick it,” he said. “A football should be kicked. It is what a football is for.”



LITTLE MANFRED

He dropped the ball on to the ground, took a step or two back and kicked it. It was a perfectly judged kick, the ball ending up so close to us that Alex had only to bend down to pick it up. The two men laughed, waved at us, and went on their way, down towards the sea, where they stood for a few moments with their backs to us, looking up and down the beach. That was when I heard one of them saying, “It was about here. I think it was about here that it happened. *Ja, Ja.* Here. I am sure.”

For a while nothing more was said. Then he went on, “I am so glad that I came back. This was a good idea of yours, Marty. I did not think it was going to be, but it is.” He spoke English with a



Part One



foreign accent of some kind. I could understand him all right, but it wasn't the kind of accent I was used to at all.

“Did I tell you what he was doing, Marty?” the man went on, his voice a little lower. I felt a little guilty eavesdropping like this on their conversation, but I couldn't resist it. I had to go on listening. “He always liked to bounce the stones across the water. He said that this reminded him of his childhood. We were working all morning on the barbed wire that was up there behind us, taking it away, and we were on lunch break. We were all sitting back up at the top of the beach, by the path there, near the boat. There was a boat then too, maybe this one, maybe

LITTLE MANFRED

not. Who knows? He said he had found a nice flat stone and he was going to bounce it across the sea, all the way to Germany. And then he walked away from us down to the water to where we are standing now, maybe a little further out because it was low tide that day.”

I was close enough to hear that the words were catching in his throat, that he was struggling to control his voice.

“You know what you should do, Walter?” said his friend, and he bent down and picked up a pebble. “Here, this is a good one. Why don’t you throw one for him, right now, all the way to Germany, just like he did?”



Part One



Even as he was throwing the stone I knew exactly what Mannie would do, but I was too slow to stop him. Mannie was after it in a flash. He was already plunging into the shallows before the pebble landed in the sea. I was yelling at him to stop, “Mannie! Mannie! Manfred! Come back!”

