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Opening extract from

School Ship Tobermory

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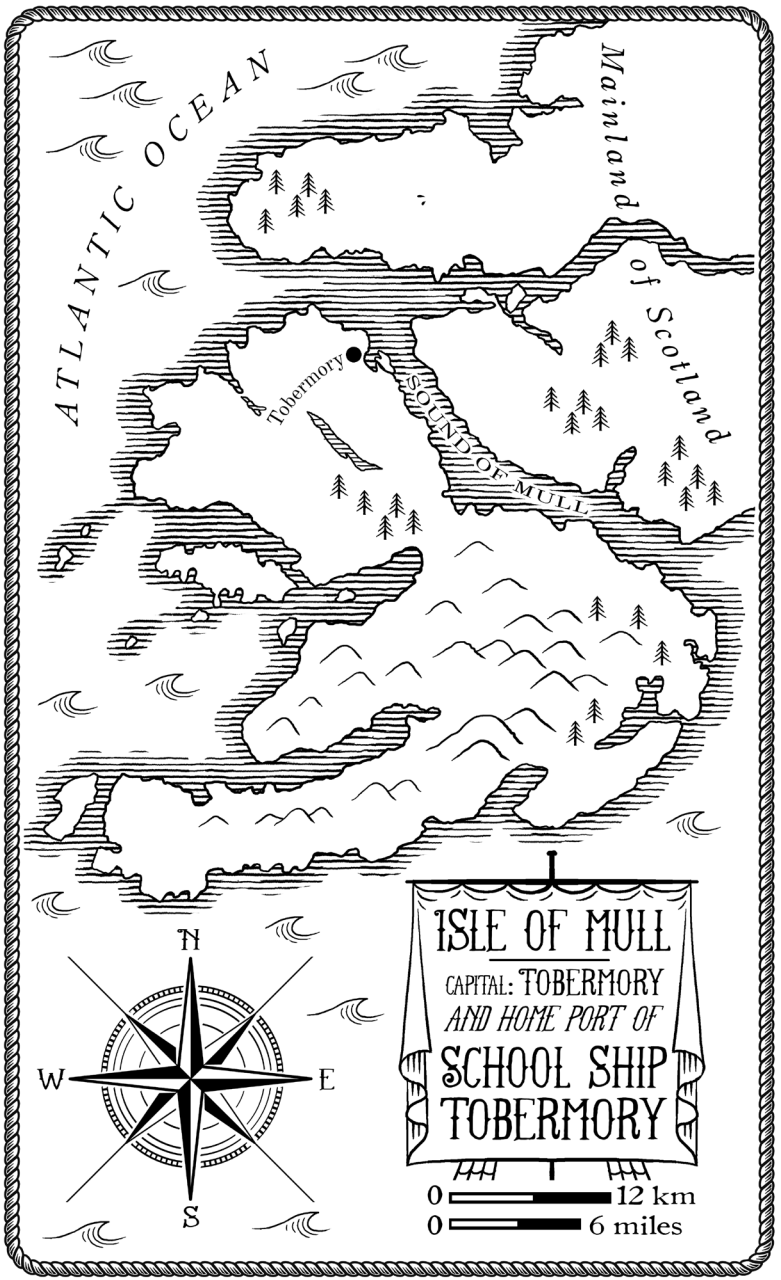
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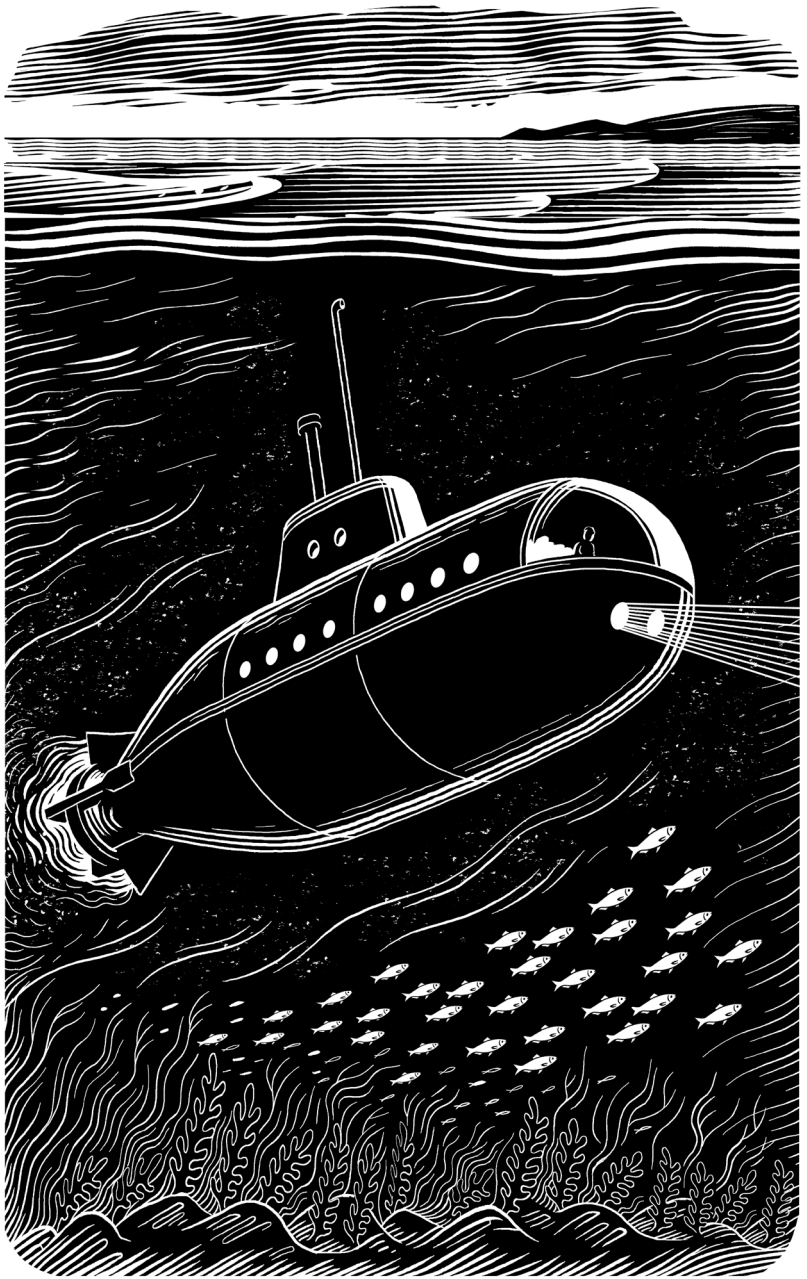
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CHAPTER 1

A very unusual school

"Ready?" asked Fee's father. "Are you ready to bring us up?"

Fee nodded. She had sat at the controls of the family submarine many times before this, but you know how it is when somebody asks you to take over a submarine – you always feel just a little bit nervous.

"Yes," she said, trying her best to sound brave. "I'm … I'm sort of ready."

Both Fee and her twin brother, Ben, had been taught from a very early age to help sail the submarine belonging to their parents, who were well-known marine scientists. Now, at twelve, almost thirteen, Fee had enough experience to bring the vessel up to the surface all by herself. But it was a very big responsibility, and it always brought to mind the things that could go wrong.

What if you made a mistake and dived instead of surfacing? What if you surfaced too quickly, so that the submarine popped up out of the sea like a cork out of water? What if you came up right underneath a large ship – a

massive oil tanker, perhaps – broke the glass observation window and then went straight down again? There were so many things that could go wrong in a submarine.

"Right," said her father. "Take her up, Fee! You'll do fine, of course, but I'll be in the engine room if you need me."

Once her father had left the control room she was quite alone. Her brother was doing his packing in his cabin, and her mother was busy in the galley – the submarine's tiny kitchen – making sandwiches for the twins. Fee was by herself. Entirely.

Slowly she pulled the control column towards her. She could not see exactly where she was going – that's never easy in a submarine – but she hoped there was nothing ahead of them, or above. The last thing a submarine wants to meet is a whale or a rock – or a whale *and* a rock, for that matter. You have to hope, too, that there isn't another submarine coming up for air in exactly the same place as you.



A few minutes later, when they were just below the surface, Ben entered the control room.

"I've finished my packing," he announced. "What about you?"

She glanced at her brother.

She could see that he was excited, but she had far more important things to do than talk about packing.

"You mustn't disturb me," she said. "I'm just about to look through the periscope."

He became quiet. It is always a special moment when you raise a submarine's periscope, because that is when you find out where you are. You hope that you have come up in the right place, but you can never be absolutely sure. So if your hands shake a little as the periscope rises above the waves, and if you feel your heart thump a bit more loudly, then that is entirely normal.

Fee peered into the periscope as she pushed it upwards. There was water, just water, swirling round in every direction, and then, with no warning at all, she saw sunlight. The periscope was above the surface.

"What can you see?" Ben asked.

She blinked. The light was very intense and it would take a moment for her eyes to adjust.

You can turn a periscope round, so that it gives you a view in every direction. She would do that – just to check that nothing was coming – but first she would have a good look at the land.

"I can see an island in the distance," she said. "I can see the shore."

Ben caught his breath. "That'll be Mull," he said. Mull was the island they were heading for.

"It's sunny," said Fee. "It's morning."

"And Tobermory?" asked Ben. "Can you see Tobermory?"

"Which Tobermory?" asked Fee. "Tobermory the town or *Tobermory* the ship?"

She was right to ask: there were two Tobermorys. Tobermory, the town, was where the *Tobermory*, the ship, was based. They were going to the *Tobermory* the ship, but Tobermory, the place, was the harbour in which she (and ships are always called *she*) was normally anchored. The *Tobermory* was a sailing ship and a school at the same time. It was a boarding school on the sea, and while most schools stay in exactly the same place all the time, this one did not. This one sailed about, teaching everybody not only subjects like history and science – the things that normal schools teach – but also everything that you needed to know if you were going to be a sailor.

"I can't see either of them," said Fee. "I think we might be a little way away. But we can't be too far."

"Let me have a look," said Ben, sounding rather impatient. Although they were twins, Fee had been born two minutes before her brother, and that made her older. It was only two minutes, but she often said that those two minutes were very important. "When you've been alive two minutes longer than somebody else," she was fond of saying, "it shows. You're just a bit more grown-up, you see."

Ben did not look at it that way. He thought he was every

bit as mature as his sister, and felt entitled to do everything she did. Right then he felt that he should have a turn on the periscope. "Let me look," he repeated.

"No," she said. "I've spotted a seagull. Oh, it's come down lower. I think it's going to land on top of the periscope!"

Fee laughed as she watched the seagull land. She had a good view of its yellow feet and of the underneath of its wings, which were white. As she watched, it flapped its wings, sending little droplets of water splashing against the outer lens of the periscope.

Slowly she moved the periscope round, so that she could look in other directions. The seagull did not like this, and flapped its wings again in protest. Then she saw it.

'There's a boat coming straight towards us!" she cried out.

"Dive!" shouted Ben.

Because his sister was busy pulling down the periscope, Ben decided to take the controls himself. Pushing the column forwards, he opened the throttle as far as he could. The submarine responded immediately, giving a lurch downwards.

It was just in time. Seconds later they heard the thud of a boat's engine pass directly over them.

"You should have looked round you," accused Ben. "You should have looked instead of watching that seagull." Although he was very fond of his sister, Ben secretly liked it when she did something to remind her she was not perfect.

Fee looked crestfallen. "I'm sorry," she said. But then she said, rather crossly, "We can all make mistakes, you know."

"Is everything all right?" their mother called out from the galley. "I felt a bit of a lurch there."

"Everything's fine," shouted Ben in reply. He could have said, 'Fee didn't spot a boat coming straight at us!' But he did not. He could have added, 'And I had to take over the controls to get us out of trouble!' But again he did not. Instead of this he simply said, 'We're going up again,' and left it at that.

They surfaced once more, and this time they were both able to have a good look through the periscope. Fee had been right – they were not far from the island – but they were also closer than she had thought to both Tobermorys. There was the town, a small harbour with brightly painted houses curving round the rim of the bay. There were people walking down the street, off to buy their newspapers and their morning bread and milk. And there in the harbour, riding proudly on its great anchor chain, was the most remarkable sailing ship they had ever seen. And across its bow was the name painted in shining blue paint – *SCHOOL SHIP TOBERMORY*.

"I think it's safe to go all the way up now," said Ben.

Fee guided the submarine right up to the surface. Now they could open the hatches and step out onto the deck to gaze at the ship that was to be their new home. As Fee

stared at the *Tobermory* through the submarine's binoculars, she felt no qualms about joining the school. She had always tried not to be frightened by new experiences – nor by the dark, nor bad dreams, nor the thought of what could go wrong. *That'll soon be me,* she thought, as she studied the distant figures on the ship's deck. Although she could not make out what they were doing, they all seemed busy.

It was a wonderful sight. The great ship was painted white from bow to stern. Along the side were lines of neat portholes – the windows of a ship. And, as he stood next to his sister, gazing over at the *Tobermory*, Ben thought about how one of the portholes would be his to look out of.

It was a very exciting thought, even if it made him feel just a little bit anxious. He had never been away from family for any length of time, and although people told him that going away to school was fun he was not sure whether it would be fun *for him*. What would it be like sharing everything with a lot of people you didn't know? Could you be sure they wouldn't laugh at you if you did something stupid? What if you lost your toothbrush, or your pyjamas, or one of your socks? What if somebody came and pushed you around or stole your money?

He had wanted to ask Fee some of these questions, but she had seemed so confident about what lay ahead that he had been unable to do so.

"What will it be like?" was all he had managed.

And she replied, "It's going to be great." And then, after

a short pause, "You're not scared, are you?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm not scared. Of course I'm not scared." That is what people who are scared often say.

"Good," said Fee. "Because I'm not going to be able to look after you all the time, you know."

She did not say that unkindly, but it did not really help Ben very much. He wondered why she had thought she would have to look after him. Did she know something he did not? Had she heard things about the *Tobermory* that he had missed? But this was not the time for such thoughts. They had the ship to look at, and now, as the submarine sailed a bit closer, they were able to make out more details.

Above the ship, towering to what seemed like an impossible height, were the masts. The *Tobermory* was a sailing ship, and it had masts from which sails were suspended. These sails would fill with wind when a breeze blew up, and it is this that would drive the ship through the water.



The ship also had an engine, of course, that it could use to go in and out of harbour or to help it on its way if there was no wind, but for most of the time it would rely on its sails.

"Look at all those ropes," marvelled Fee, pointing to what looked like an elaborate web spun by some giant spider.

Ben shielded his eyes from the sun to get a better view. "That's the rigging. Those ropes keep the masts in place."

"And you climb up them?" It all seemed very high to Fee.

"Yes," said Ben, taking his turn with the binoculars. "I've seen pictures of people doing that."

Although they had spent a lot of time on their parents' submarine – sometimes weeks and weeks at a stretch – Fee and Ben had never been on a sailing ship. That had not stopped them, though, from applying for a place on board the school ship, encouraged by their parents, who had decided that the *Tobermory* was just the right school for them. They had needed to think about boarding school for Ben and Fee as they were often away on research expeditions. Up to then, the twins had stayed with an aunt, who looked after them while their parents were away, but this was going to be much more difficult, as the aunt had found a job that involved travel.

They had looked at various schools, but had not really liked what they saw. One was in a remote place on a mountainside and appeared dark and uncomfortable. The dormitory floors, they noticed, were all at an angle, with the result that the beds followed the slope of the mountainside. Sleeping in such a bed, thought Fee, would be most peculiar, as your toes would be much lower than your head, and all your blood would end up in your feet. And the blankets would gradually slip down to the end of the

bed, which would mean that your top half would be too cold and your lower half too warm. “Not for you, I think,” said their mother – much to their relief.

Then there was the school that made everyone take a cold shower every morning. “It’s very character-building,” explained the principal.

“And very freezing,” said their mother – to suppressed giggles from Fee and Ben.

That same principal believed in lots of physical activity – all the time. So, as people moved from classroom to classroom they all ran, and meals were eaten standing up, so that people could do push-ups and other exercises between courses.

“It all helps to build people up,” said the principal proudly.

Then somebody suggested the *Tobermory*, and their parents had remembered once meeting the captain when he had once berthed his ship near their submarine. “He’s a very kind man,” remarked their mother, who wanted the best for her twins. “You’ll be happy there. I’ve heard good things about that ship.”

“Such as?” asked Ben. The idea of going away to school was still new to him.

“Just good things in general,” his mother replied. “Good things like making friends, which you’ve always wanted. And other things too …” She did not explain further, but just waved her hand and said, “You’ll find out.”

His mother was trying to reassure him, thought Ben, but did she really know what life would be like on the *Tobermory*?

“That’s right,” said Fee, who had overheard this conversation. “You’ll find out.”

But she, too, did not know, thought Ben.

Their father nosed the submarine in as close to the *Tobermory* as he thought safe.

“You’ll have to paddle the rest of the way in your dinghy,” he explained. “We’ll wave goodbye from here.”

Ben and Fee began to blow up the inflatable boat that had been a present for their last birthday. It was not very big, but it would have just enough room to carry them both, together with their kitbags. They had been told not to bring a suitcase, but rather to bring luggage that could be folded and put into a locker. Now their two full kitbags, both labelled with their names, Ben and Fee MacTavish, stood at the ready on top of the submarine.

Once the boat was inflated, Ben pushed it gently from the submarine deck and into the water. Their mother, coming up from below, pressed two packets of sandwiches into their hands. “You might feel hungry before lunch,” she said. “I’ve heard the school food’s very good on the *Tobermory*, but just in case …”

They thanked her, and she gave them each a goodbye kiss, as did their father.

"I know you're going to be all right," said their mother. "But I'll be thinking of you. Will you think of me too? Every day?"

They both reassured her that they would.

"And you will write, won't you?" she said. "It doesn't have to be a long letter – even a postcard will do."

"Of course we will," said Fee.

"We'll be back to collect you at the end of term," Fee's father said.

"Work hard," said their mother. "And remember to clean your teeth after every meal – *every* meal, please. And don't forget to floss!"

"Yes, yes," said Ben. He was eager to make the short crossing to their new home and he had decided to be brave. He could see that already there were other people on the deck of the sailing ship – people in smart blue uniforms swabbing the decks from buckets of sea water, polishing brass fittings, and generally looking very busy. These would be his new schoolmates – his new friends, he hoped. He was eager to meet them.

They climbed down into the boat and set off.

"Goodbye!" shouted their mother, waving a handkerchief.

"Goodbye!" they both shouted, as they started to paddle their way across the short stretch of water.

As they reached the side of great sailing ship, Fee and Ben both turned round to have one last look at their

parents. But their mother and father had disappeared back into the submarine, and now the dark tube of the vessel was beginning to sink below the surface of the sea. They waved, although they knew that their parents would not be able to see them. They felt sad to be saying goodbye, and both of them now felt a bit anxious, but when you are starting at a new school there is no time to think too much about the family you have left behind. This is especially true when your new school is towering above you and somebody is lowering a rope ladder for you to climb up. Not everybody starts school that way, but Ben and Fee did.

"Tie your dinghy to this rope," shouted somebody from above them. "Then, once, you've climbed up the rope ladder, we'll pull your boat up too."

A rope came snaking down from above. Fee tied this to the rubber boat, stowed the paddles safely, and then she and Ben began to inch their way up the rope ladder.

"Ben," whispered Fee as they began the climb. "Aren't you just a little bit … scared?"

Ben, who had started first, looked down at his sister beneath him. His decision to be brave was working. "Don't be scared, Fee," he said. "I'm not."

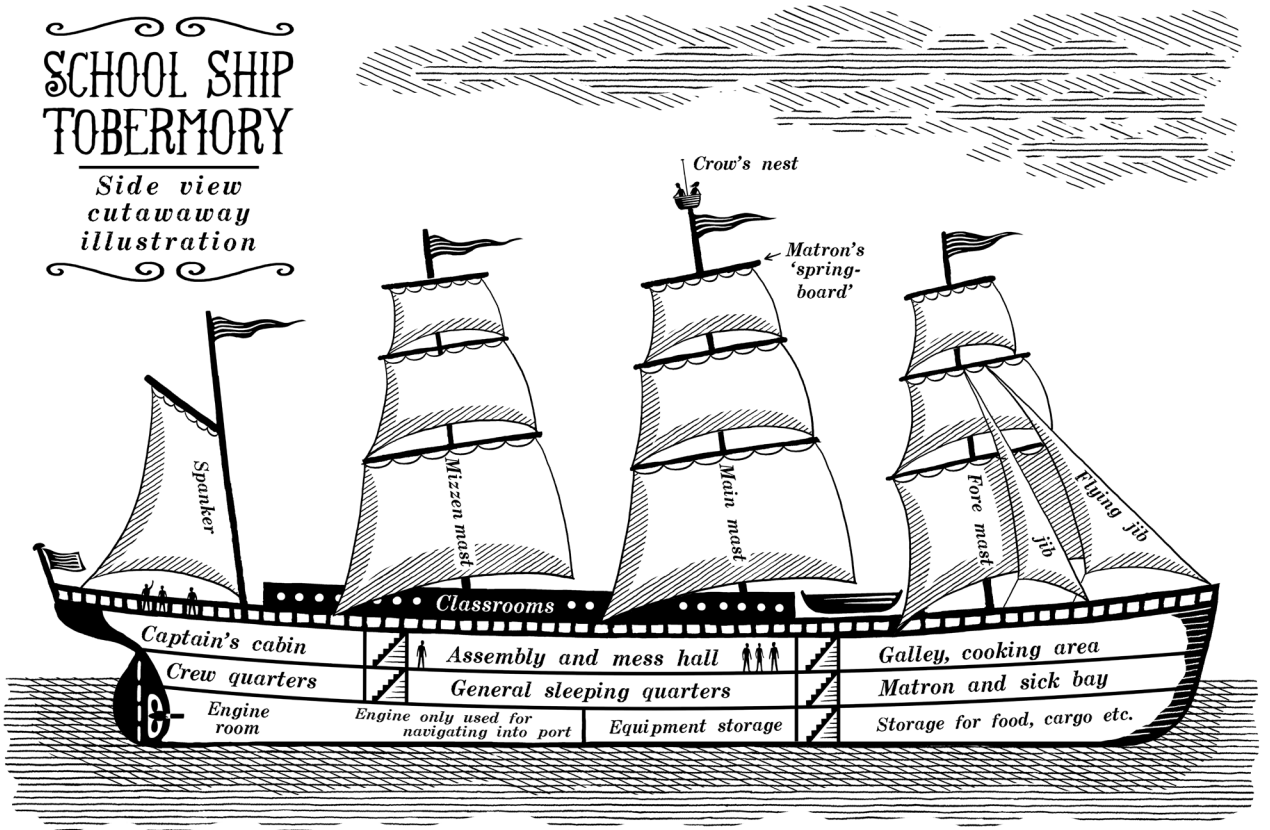
But she was. And so would anybody be. The water seemed a long way down below now, and the *Tobermory* was rocking in the swell of the sea, making the rope ladder swing out from the side of the ship.

"I didn't hear you," said Fee. "What did you say?"

"I said I'm not scared," repeated Ben.

And oddly enough, simply saying that he was not scared seemed to help.

They were nearly at the top of the ladder now, and he even managed to smile as he saw a pair of hands stretch out over the railings to help him clamber onto the deck. He looked up and saw that the hands belonged to a boy of about his own age, dressed in a smart blue uniform and grinning at him in a friendly way. The boy had a cheerful look to him – the sort of look that makes you think, *I hope he'll be my friend*.



"I'm Badger Tomkins," said the boy as he gripped Ben's wrists and pulled him onto the deck. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ben," said Ben.

"I was told to look out for you," said Badger. "Welcome aboard the *Tobermory*!"

Badger now turned to help Fee. "You must be Fee," he said. "I saw your name on the list of new students. Welcome, Fee!"

"What do we do now?" asked Ben.

"We haul up your dinghy," said Badger. "Then we let the air out of it and stow it away. Everything has to be stowed away neatly on the ship. It's one of the rules."

"Are there lots of rules?" asked Ben.

Badger laughed. "Plenty," he said. "Maybe five or six hundred. But don't worry. You probably only need to know ten. Those are called the big rules. All the others are called

small rules, and we don't pay much attention to them."

Fee stared at Badger. "Do you like it here?" she asked.

Badger thought this a rather odd question. "But of course I like it," he answered. "This is the most amazing, fantastic, exciting, superb, ace school in … in the entire world."

"Are you joking?" asked Ben.

"Not at all," said Badger. "You'll see soon enough." He paused. "Mind you, I won't pretend that there aren't some things that aren't so great."

"What are those?" asked Ben.

"You'll see," said Badger again. He looked at his watch. "We'd better get your boat up. Breakfast is in half an hour and if you're late all the sausages will be taken." He made a face "Some people always try to take more than their fair share."

"Who are they?" asked Fee.

"You'll see," said Badger once again. "But let's not stand about talking. Let's get the boat up and then I can take you to the Captain before breakfast. We always have to take new people to the Captain when they arrive."

"Is he the principal?" asked Ben.

"He is," said Badger. "But you never call him that. He's called the Captain because he's the captain of the ship. His full name is Captain Macbeth. He's also a teacher, of course, but his main job is running the ship."

They began to haul up their dinghy. Once it was up on

deck, they took out the plug, deflated it, and stowed it away in a nearby locker. The locker was full of other dinghies, all folded up just as theirs was. 'This is where we keep our personal boats," explained Badger. "Mine is that red one over there. It has a bit of a leak, I'm afraid, but I don't use it often now. We have a class in the care and maintenance of rubber boats. They teach you how to stick a plaster over any holes."

Badger looked at his watch again. "Right," he said. "Ready for the Captain? Yes? Well, in that case follow me!"