

CHAPTER ONE

YOU CAN KEEP CHRISTMASSES, BIRTHDAYS and all that. For me the high time of the year was always my summer holidays at Treginnis Isaf, Uncle Rob's and Aunty Eleri's farm down by the sea in Wales. It was a place of clambering rocks, ratty barns and fields of shifting sheep and uddery cows. You could pick up the warm eggs, you could clean down the milking parlour. And all around were the cliffs and beaches where we basked and swam with the seals, where we watched killer whales and porpoises. For a city boy like me it was a paradise, and I never wanted anything better. Nothing could

have been better. You could lean against the wind on Buzzard Rock, you could loll laughing in the fields, fly Barry's yellow kite, or race his battered boats across the duck pond. Every year was the best, but best of all was the summer of the Sandman, the giant turtles – and the great grey cucumber.

I arrived as usual by train and Aunty Eleri was there to pick me up, all smiles and kisses and smelling of milk. But no Barry. I soon found out why.

'Only happened yesterday morning,' she said, fighting with the gear lever. 'Playing football he was in that top field with his da, you know the rocky field beyond the sheep-dip pit? Tripped and broke his leg in two places. Nasty. Plastered he is all the way up, and he's got six stitches in his head. Blood all over the place. Concussion maybe. We've got to keep him quiet for a couple of days.' She patted my knee.

'There we are then. You're here now. That'll cheer him up.'

It was a blow. Barry was my cousin of course, but he was also my best friend in all the world. Like two sides of a coin we were, but as different as chalk and cheese. Barry was a head taller than me, ran faster and knew where and how to catch fish. He could sweeten up a fox just by whistling through his throat like a screaming rabbit; and no one played practical jokes like Barry, no one. As for me, I read a lot of books, played chess like a Russian Master and could say the alphabet backwards in less than four seconds flat. Aunty Eleri talked all the way back to the farm, but I never heard a word. I was wondering what I was going to do with myself for the whole month with Barry's leg in plaster. 'There we are now,' she said. 'We're home.'

Polly came skipping out to the car as we