

## 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 Auntie 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

pulled up outside the house. Polly was Barry's little sister. Only seven years old she was and bouncy like a puppy. She was maybe a little bigger than the year before, but not much; and I noticed she was missing her two top front teeth. She took my hand at once and dragged me off. 'Barry's busted his leg,' she said cheerfully.

Barry was propped up on the sitting-room sofa in his pyjamas. His great white leg seemed twice as long as the other one and twice as fat too. He wiggled his chalky toes at me. 'Hello, Mike,' he said, grinning. 'I've bust my leg.' And he patted the plaster.

'So I see,' I said.

'Da's fault,' he went on. 'He tripped me.'

'He never,' Polly said. I won't tell you what Barry said, but I felt at home already.

Tea time brought Uncle Rob and Dadci in from the fields and Auntie Eleri had made a tea

of Welsh cakes and scones and raspberry jam and cream. I never liked the first meal though. I suppose I always felt a bit awkward. They all kept asking me questions about Mum, about school, except Dadci – that's my grandfather – who just smiled at me and pushed the cream closer. 'Eat up now Michael, there's a good boy,' he said. 'We'll fatten you up if it's the last thing we do.'

Later it was Polly's bath time and she came down in her primrose dressing gown with the blue butterflies. All pink and clean she was, and she said she'd have her story now.

'What about a "please" then?' said Dadci frowning at her.

'Please,' said Polly sweetly. Dadci was about the only one who could make her behave.

Stories at Treginnis were like a long happy sigh at the end of each day. You sat on Dadci's lap in the deep brown armchair with the



stuffing coming out of the arms; and he'd always begin: 'Let me see now . . .' Of course I was too old to sit on his lap – it was Polly's turn these days – but I listened just the same. Everyone did. We all knew every word, every sentence of every story; but you never tired of them because he told them like he was telling them for the first time, like they were really true, and you could join in whenever you liked.

We were all there that evening when Dadci began with the story of the Sandman, all about those rocks down on Whitesands Beach that looked like a great fat giant lying asleep in the sand. (So we all snored noisily.) 'He fell asleep there thousands and thousands of years ago after a terrible storm-tossed journey across from Ireland in a huge coracle pulled by three giant turtles. Now there's not many who know this, children, but if you stay still in one place

