

'GREAT FUN' *Lovereading4kids*

ALEXANDER
MCALL SMITH



THE SECRET
OF THE DARK
WATERFALL

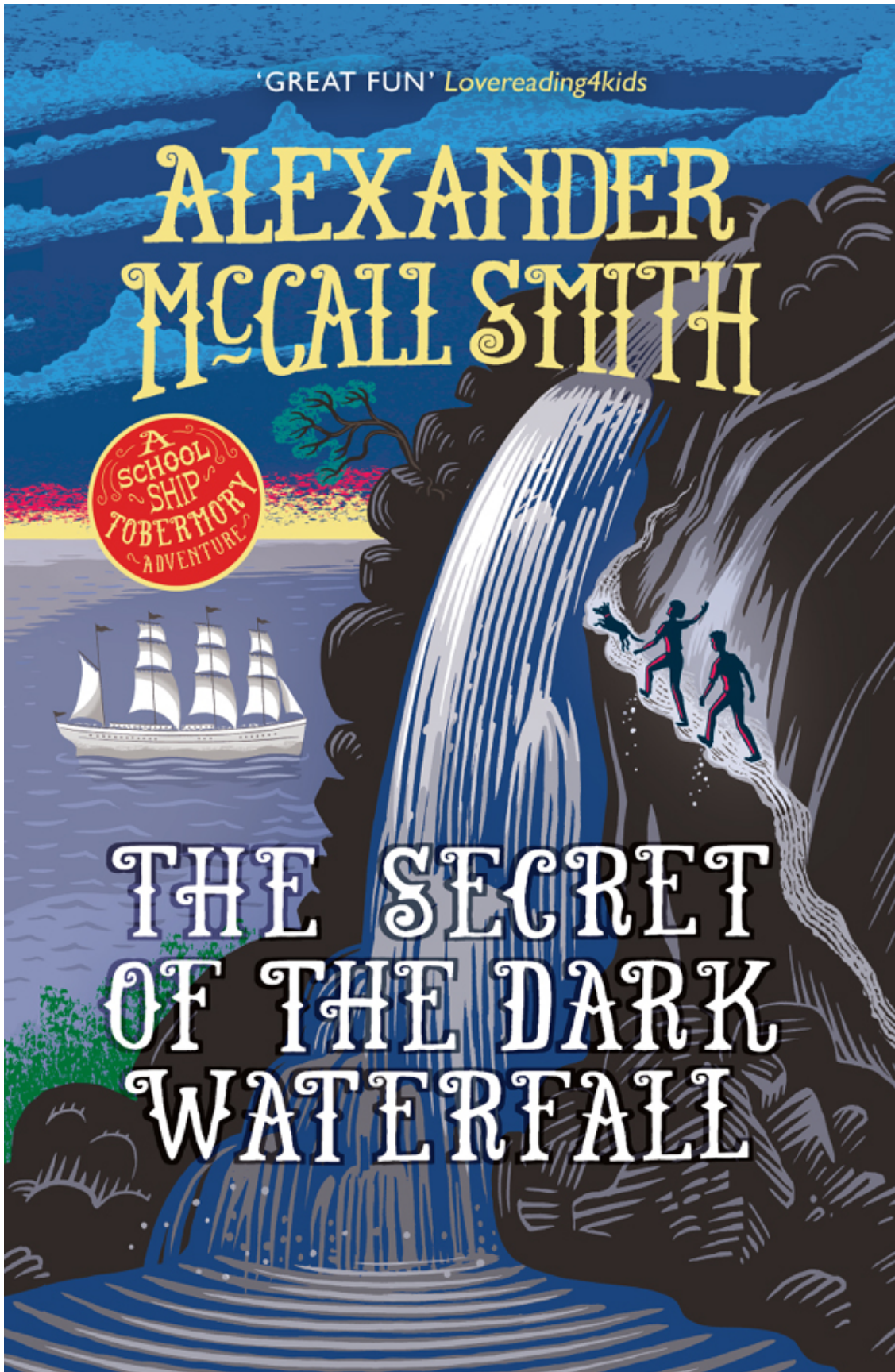


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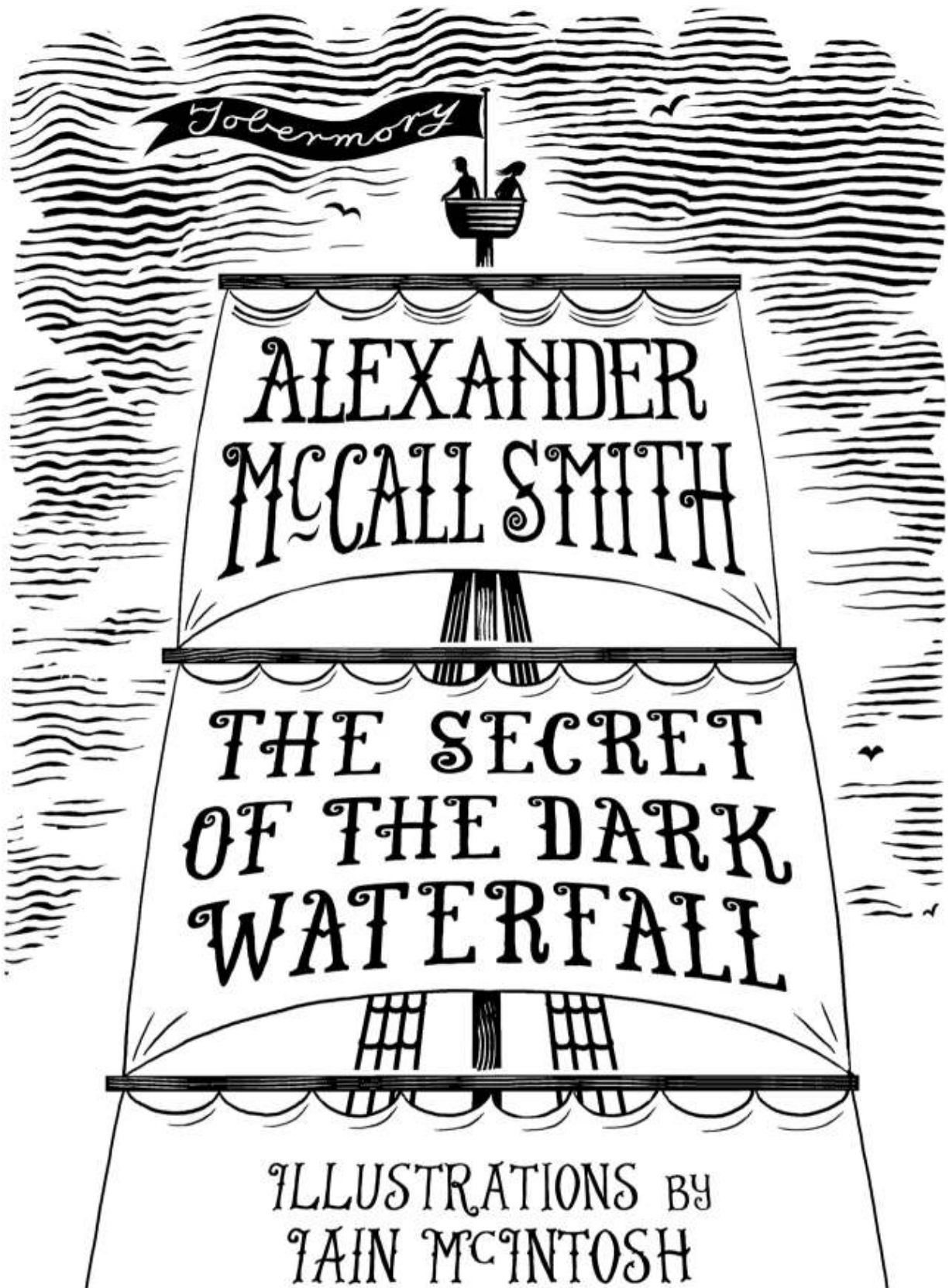
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Alexander McCall Smith is the author of the bestselling No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series. He has written over thirty books for young readers, including three other School Ship *Tobermory* adventures.

Iain McIntosh's illustrations have won awards in the worlds of advertising, design and publishing. He has illustrated many of Alexander McCall Smith's books.





TOBERMORY

ALEXANDER
MCCALL SMITH

THE SECRET
OF THE DARK
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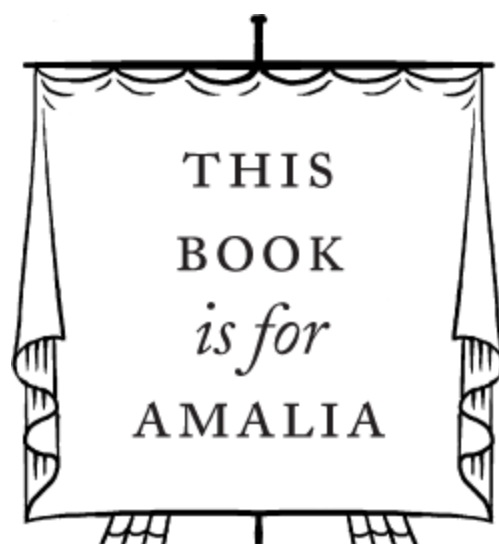
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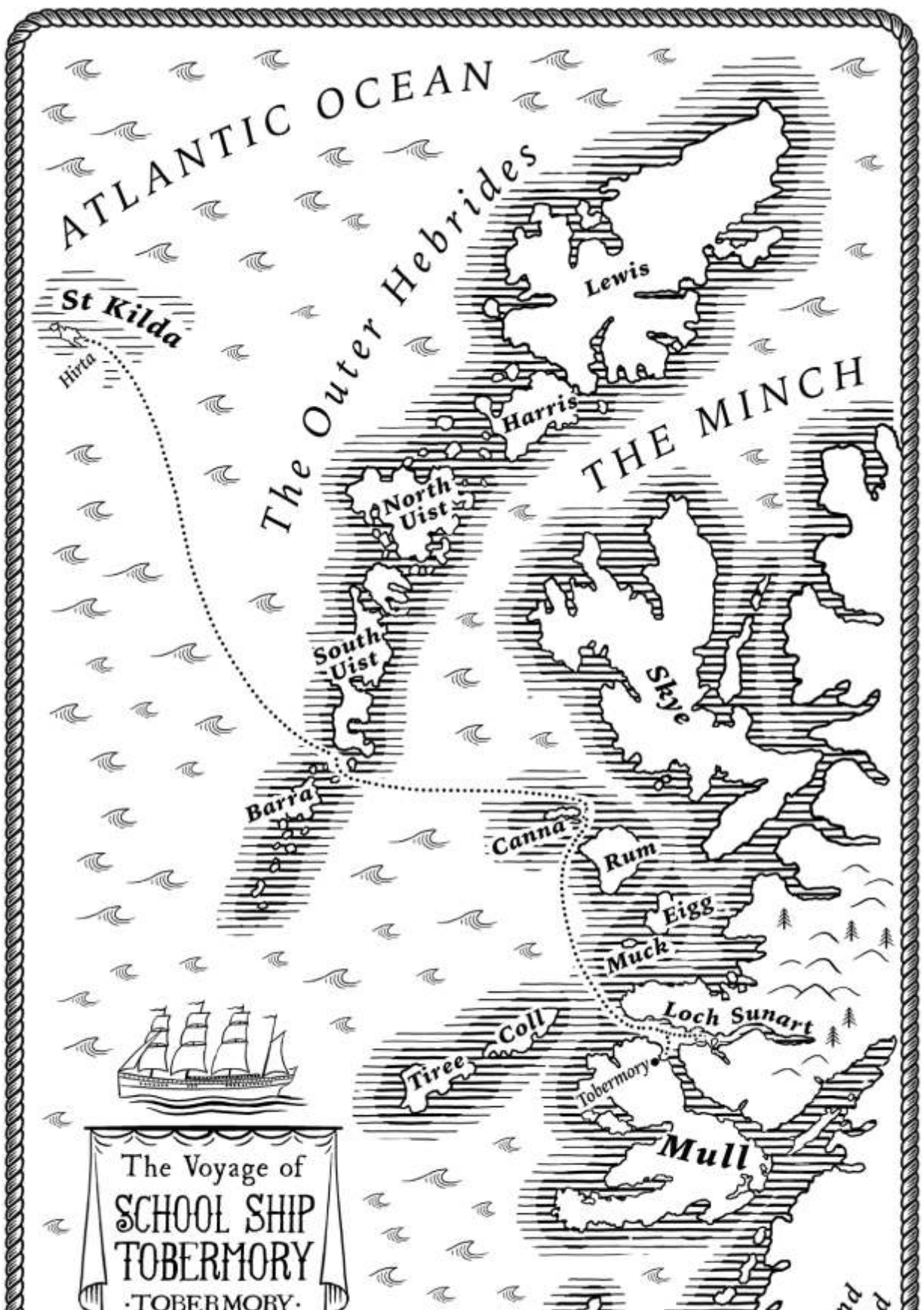
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ATLANTIC OCEAN

St Kilda

Hirta

The Outer Hebrides

Lewis

Harris

North Uist

South Uist

Barra

Canna

Rum

Eigg

Muck

Coll

Tiree

Tobermory

Loch Sunart

Mull

The Voyage of
SCHOOL SHIP
TOBERMORY
TOBERMORY





CHAPTER 1

A new term begins

Ben and Fee MacTavish were two ordinary people, rather like you and me. But there was one way in which they were different – they were twins. And it is a bit different being a twin, as any twin will tell you.

“It’s like being double,” Fee explained. “You feel that you’re you, but then you also feel that there’s another you – if you see what I mean.”

Her brother agreed. “Yes,” he said. “It’s exactly like that.”

There was another way in which their life was not the same as everybody else’s. Most people go to ordinary schools – schools that have buildings. These buildings have doors and windows and corridors like any other building and are, of course, always in the same place. When you go to a school like that, you always know exactly where it is going to be. And you would be most surprised if one day you arrived for school and it was not there, but had floated away over the horizon. Most people would be a bit surprised by that.



But that was exactly what Ben and Fee's school could do. For some time now, they had been students on the School Ship *Tobermory*. This was a large sailing ship based in the town of Tobermory on the Scottish island of Mull. The *Tobermory* took students from all over the world. All the classes were held on board the ship and all the students lived there for several months at a time. Everybody had a cabin, shared with one other person, and this cabin was their bedroom. Three meals a day were served in a large dining hall, called the mess hall, having been cooked in the galley by Cook, a stout man with tattoos of an anchor, a sailing ship and a whale on his arms. The food was always good and, of course, being at sea, the sea air gave everyone a healthy appetite.

Fee and Ben had just celebrated their birthday, which had fallen in the holidays when they were staying with their parents. Their mother and father were both scientists who

worked on their own research submarine. Their job required them to go off on long underwater trips, taking samples of seaweed and coral, of sand and rock, and of all the things that make up the underwater world. They also studied fish and sharks, and sometimes even whales, finding out where these wonderful creatures went to, and how they lived their watery lives.



Sometimes Ben and Fee were able to go off on the family submarine, but, for the most part, the need to go to school made that impossible. It was for this reason that they had been enrolled as students on the *Tobermory*.

“We’d love to be able to send you to an ordinary school,” said their mother. “But that just wouldn’t work, would it?”

We'd be away on our submarine and you'd have nobody to look after you."

"Don't worry," said Fee. "We much prefer going to ship school anyway, don't we, Ben?"

Ben did not always agree with what his sister said, but in this case he thought she was right. "Yes," he said. "It's much more fun being part of a ship school. And we learn all sorts of things about sailing and the sea."

"And other things too," Fee reminded him. "Maths and history and science. We study all of that as well as knots and swimming, and how to splice a rope, and ..."

"... and how to rescue people who have fallen into the sea," added Ben.

Their parents thought that all of this was very useful.

"And it's great for making friends," Fee said.

"Good," said her mother. "Friends are really important."

Once again, Ben agreed. Friends were important, but sometimes friends could be a problem. And at the beginning of that exciting new term on the *Tobermory*, Ben realised that he had a major problem – with his best friend.

Ben's best friend on the *Tobermory*, and probably in the world, was Badger Tomkins. This was not his friend's real name, but it was the name that everybody had always used. Some people – although this was probably untrue – said that Badger had forgotten what his real name was, and that even his parents had trouble remembering it. That can sometimes happen when somebody has a nickname. When their real name is used they might look blank and say, with a puzzled look, "Who? Me? Are you talking to me?"

Badger came from New York, where his father ran a large business. Badger was not quite sure what this business was, but he knew that it involved a lot of talking on the telephone and shouting. Badger's father was always

so busy with work that he had little time left for his son. He was not deliberately unkind to him, but they hardly ever did anything together.



Badger's mother also seemed to have far too much to do to give him much attention. She played a lot of tennis, and although Badger would try to watch her tennis matches, he very quickly became bored. He also felt that she was a bit too competitive. If she did not win, she would storm off the court, sometimes even throwing her racquet down on the ground. That was not the way you should play tennis, thought Badger.

"You must have a really interesting time at home," Badger once remarked to Ben sadly. "Your parents take you on their submarine, don't they? And they talk to you, I guess."

Ben did not know what to say. It can be difficult to say very much when you know that a friend is unhappy. You feel

that you should say something like “Cheer up” or “Things can hardly be that bad.” But sometimes your friend can’t cheer up, no matter how hard they try, and sometimes things actually are every bit as bad as they seem to be.

Ben and Badger shared a cabin on the *Tobermory*. They were on Middle Deck, on the port, or left, side of the ship. In this cabin were two hammocks – the swinging beds in which sailors have always slept – two lockers for clothes and other personal possessions, and a small table with a shared chair. There was also a porthole that had to be kept closed most of the time but that could be opened in good weather.

Sharing a room with somebody else can be difficult. It often happens that people who have started off sharing as friends after a few days feel desperate to get away from each other. This may be because one person is tidy, while the other is not. It may be because one person is very quiet when asleep, while the other mumbles or coughs or snores loudly. Or there may be many other reasons why sharing simply doesn’t work. It had never been like that with Ben and Badger. They liked sharing a cabin, and they enjoyed talking to each other at night after lights out. Often they would lie there in the darkness and talk for what seemed like hours before sleep covered them with its soft blanket of silence. And then, in the morning, they would find that they still had things to say, and would carry on talking until they tumbled out of bed to begin the day.

But now Ben found that sharing with Badger was just not what it used to be. Something had happened to his old friend, and he could not work out exactly what it was. It was not that he looked any different – there was no mistaking him for somebody else – but when it came to the way he spoke, then he had clearly changed.

"Did you have a good holiday?" Ben asked Badger when he came into the cabin at the beginning of the new term and started to unpack his bag.

"Yes," came the reply. That was all, just: "Yes."

Ben asked his friend whether he had gone home. "Yes," came the reply.

"To New York?" asked Ben.

"Yes."

Ben frowned. Surely Badger could say something more than yes. New York was an exciting city, and there was always a lot going on there.

"I wish I could go to New York," said Ben. "What do you think I should do there – if I ever go?"

At first this question was greeted with silence. Then, rather grudgingly, as if he did not really want to answer, Badger said with a shrug, "I don't know. I'm sure you could find something to do."

Ben stared at Badger. This was not like the friend he had known for so long and with whom he had shared so many adventures – the friend who was usually more than happy to talk about all the things he had been doing. He wondered whether he should ask him if there was something wrong, but decided not to say anything just yet. There are times when people do not feel like talking, and it is best to leave them alone. Usually they snap out of their mood sooner or later, and return to normal. That would probably happen to Badger, Ben thought.

Ben busied himself with his own unpacking. He hoped that Badger would start to talk, but he did not. Badger simply slumped on his hammock and buried his nose in a book. Ben's friend might not want to talk, but there were plenty of other people who did, and Ben now set off to find

them. "I'm going up on deck to see if everyone else is back," he said.

There was a grunt from Badger – just that, a grunt, and nothing more. Ben hesitated at the door, glancing quickly at his friend. If Badger was going to be rude, then he would at least let him know what he thought about his behaviour. So rather than say anything, Ben slammed the door behind him as he left the cabin. That would let Badger know how he felt, and that, perhaps, might bring him to his senses.

Up on deck, Ben found his sister standing near the foremast, talking to Poppy Taggart, one of her closest friends on board the *Tobermory*, and the girl with whom she shared a cabin. They were looking at some photographs that Poppy was holding. Poppy came from Australia, and was usually unable to go home for the holidays because the journey took far too long. This time, however, she had been able to spend a whole month with her family, helping to shear the sheep on their farm. Like Ben and Fee, Poppy lived on Middle Deck – one of the three decks on which students on board the *Tobermory* had their cabins. In fact, Poppy was the Senior Prefect of Middle Deck, which was an important position.