



THE SHIP OF FOOLS



A YOUNG BOY NAMED BEN once ran away to sea. But the ship he joined was a very odd one indeed.

The Captain always wore his trousers tied over his head with seaweed. The Bosun danced the hornpipe all day long from dawn to dusk wearing nothing but beetroot juice. And the First Mate kept six families of mice down the neck of his jumper!

‘This is a rum vessel, me hearty!’ said Ben to one of the sailors, who was at that moment about to put his head into the ship’s barrel of syrup.

‘It’s a Ship of Fools!’ grinned the sailor, and he stuck his head in the syrup.

‘I suppose you all must know what you’re doing,’ murmured young Ben, but the sailor couldn’t reply because he was all stuck up with syrup.

Just then the Captain yelled: ‘Raise the hanky! And sit on the snails!’ Although, because he still had his trousers over his head, what it actually sounded like was: ‘Gmpf der wmfky! Umf bmfwmf umf wmf!’

‘I’m sure he means: “Raise the anchor! And set the sails!”’ said young Ben to himself. But whatever it was the Captain had said, nobody seemed to be taking the slightest bit of notice.



‘They must be doing more important things,’ said Ben to himself. ‘So I suppose *I’d* better obey Captain’s orders.’

So Ben raised the anchor by himself, and hoisted the sails as best he could, and the ship sailed off into the blue.

‘Where are we heading, shipmate?’ Ben asked a sailor who was hanging over the side, trying to paint the ship with a turnip and a pot of lemonade.

‘Goodness knows!’ exclaimed the sailor. ‘It’s a Ship of Fools!’

‘The Captain will know,’ said Ben, and he climbed up to the bridge, where the Captain was standing upside-down at the wheel, trying to steer with his feet.

‘I’m almost sure you shouldn’t steer a ship like that,’ said Ben to himself, ‘but then what do I know? I’m just a raw land-lubber getting his first taste of the briney.’ But even so, Ben realized that the Captain couldn’t see where they were going, because his trousers were still over his eyes. As it happened, the ship was, at that moment, heading straight for a lighthouse! So Ben grabbed the wheel, and said: ‘What’s the course, skipper?’

‘Bmf Bmf Wmf!’ replied the Captain.

‘Nor’ Nor’ West it is, sir!’ said Ben, and he steered the ship safely round the lighthouse and off for the open sea.

Well, they hadn’t sailed very far before a storm blew up.

‘Shall I take in the yard-arm and reef the sails, Captain?’ yelled Ben. But the Captain was far too busy trying to keep his game of marbles still, as the ship rolled from side to side.

The wind began to howl, and the sea grew angry.

‘I better had, anyway,’ said Ben to himself, and he ran about the ship, preparing for the storm ahead.

As he did so, the rest of the crew grinned and waved at him, but they all carried on doing whatever it was they were doing. One of them was hanging by his hair from the mainmast, trying to play the violin with a spoon. Another was varnishing his nose with the ship’s varnish. While another was trying to stretch his ears by tying them to the capstan and jumping overboard.

‘Well... I wouldn’t have thought this was the way to run a ship!’ said young Ben. ‘I suppose they know the ropes and I’m just learning. Even so... I didn’t realize the newest