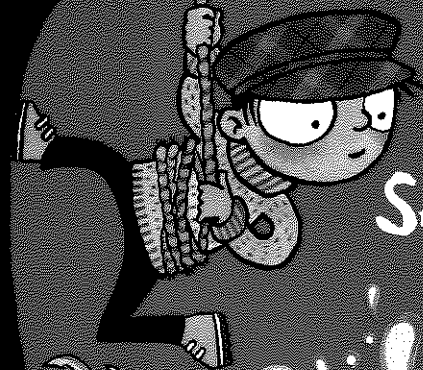


OLIVER AND THE SEAWIGS

BY
PHILIP REEVE
AND
SARAH MCINTYRE



'A gloriously wacky story'
THE TIMES

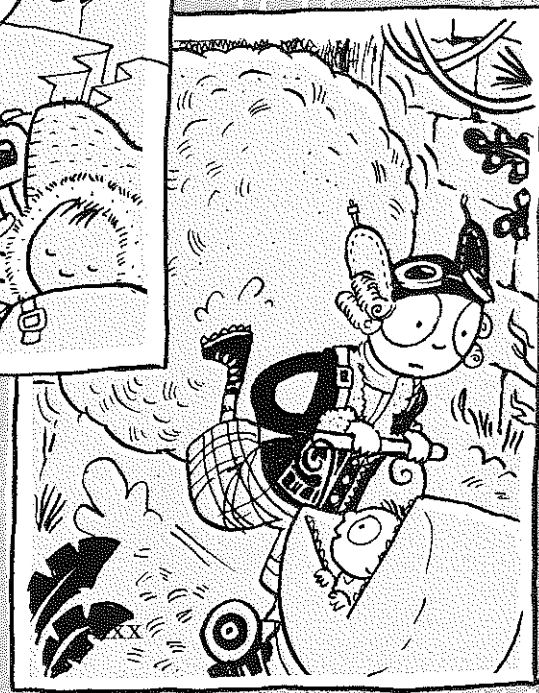
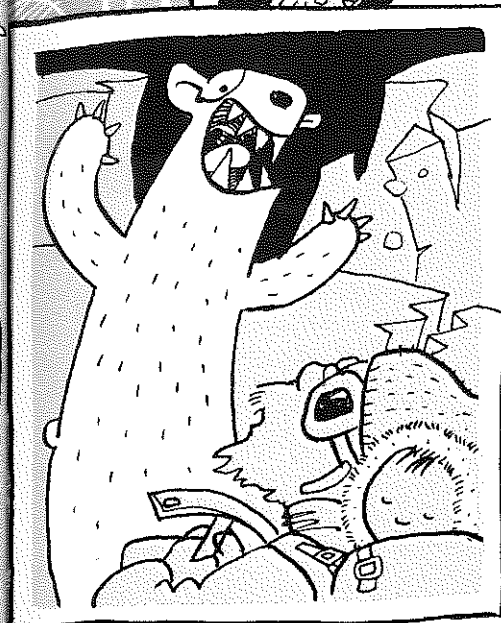
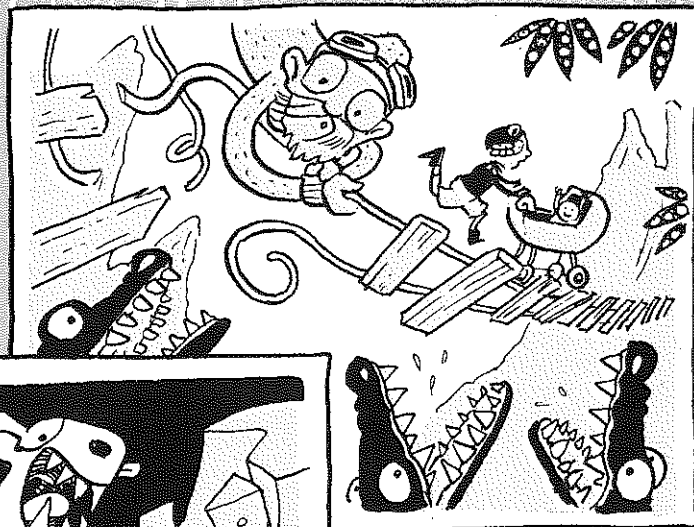
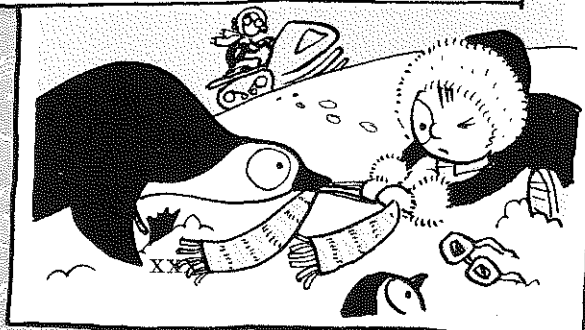


★ IF ★

THIS ADVENTURE
IS UNDERTAKEN
FAR TOO LIGHTLY,

THE READER HEREBY DISMISSES
THE AUTHORS FROM ALL RESPONSIBILITY
FOR UNTIMELY DEATH OR INJURY
DUE TO DROWNING, KIDNAPPING BY
SEA MONKEYS, OR GENERAL
UNEXPECTED DISAPPEARANCES.

The Management

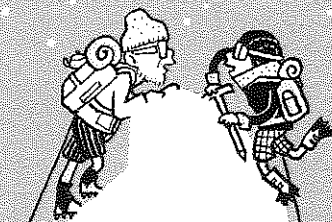




ONE

Oliver Crisp was only ten years old, but they had been a busy and exciting ten years, because Oliver's mother and father were explorers.

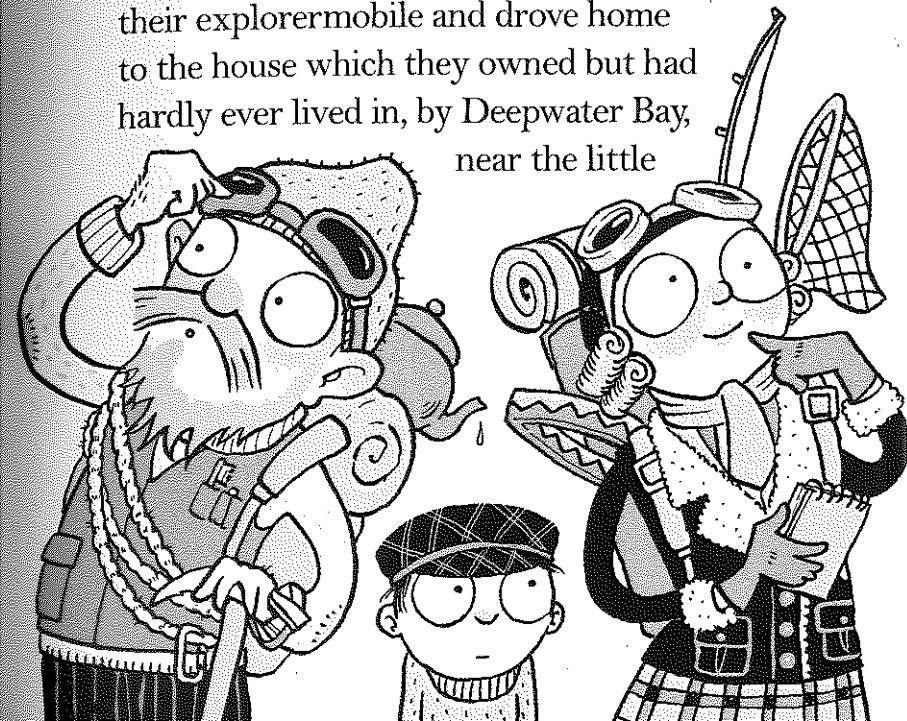
They had met on the top of
Mount Everest.



They had been married
at the Lost Temple of
Amon Hotep, and had spent
their honeymoon searching for the
elephants' graveyard. And when
young Oliver was born they simply
bought themselves a back carrier and
an off-road baby buggy and went
right on exploring.

But at last there came a day when Mr
and Mrs Crisp realized there was just
nothing left to explore. They had trekked
to the headwaters of all the great rivers,
and stood on the summits of all the
unconquered mountains. Thanks to them,
the Lost City of Propacopaketl was lost
no longer; the Mystery of the Mokele
Mbembe Marshes had been solved. There
were no more blank spaces left on the map.

So they packed their belongings aboard
their explorermobile and drove home
to the house which they owned but had
hardly ever lived in, by Deepwater Bay,
near the little



seaside town of St Porrocks. 'No more exploring for us,' they told each other sadly. 'It's time we settled down.'

Oliver wasn't sad, though. He was excited. He was tired of living the explorer's life. The house he was coming home to was one he'd only seen on holidays; brief two-week breaks before fresh expeditions. Ten years on the move! No time to make friends, or feel at home anywhere. No time to go to school. He'd never even had a proper bedroom of his own, just a bunk in the back of the explorermobile, and all his things were hidden away in trunks and storage boxes in the spaces under the explorermobile's seats. He thought it would be exciting to have a whole house to live in, and wake up every day to the same view. At Deepwater Bay he would have his own bedroom and bathroom, and he would be starting next term at the school in St Porrocks. (That might

not sound so good to you, but Oliver had never been to school, and he was excited about that, too.)

He perched between his parents as Mum steered the explorermobile carefully along the winding lanes. He was waiting for the moment when Deepwater Bay came in sight.

'It's not a very pretty house,' his mother reminded him. 'It's really rather old and creaky, and the wind blows right through it. It needs lots of work doing, but we never found the time. Or the money. There's not a lot of money in exploring.'

'OK,' said Oliver, but he didn't stop feeling excited.

They came over a sudden headland and there it was; the blue bay all dotted with shaggy, steep-sided islands. The house stood at the top of the beach. It was big and grey, with orange lichen dappling its roof.

'Wow!' said Oliver.



'Wow!' said his dad.

'Wow!' said his mum, stopping the
explorermobile on a curve of the steep
lane and just sitting there, staring in
sheer amazement.



'Wow!' they all three said again. Oliver was pleased that his parents sounded just as thrilled as he was. Then he looked at them, and saw that it was not the house that they were looking at, but all those scruffy islands in the bay.

'Where have *they* come from?' asked his father. 'I don't remember *them* . . .'

Mum was rustling the map. 'They are not marked here!' she gasped.

'Nine . . . ten . . . fifteen . . .' Dad muttered. 'They must be new islands! Volcanic, probably . . .'

'Unmapped!' said Mum.

'Uncharted!' said Dad.

'Unexplored!' they whispered, both together.

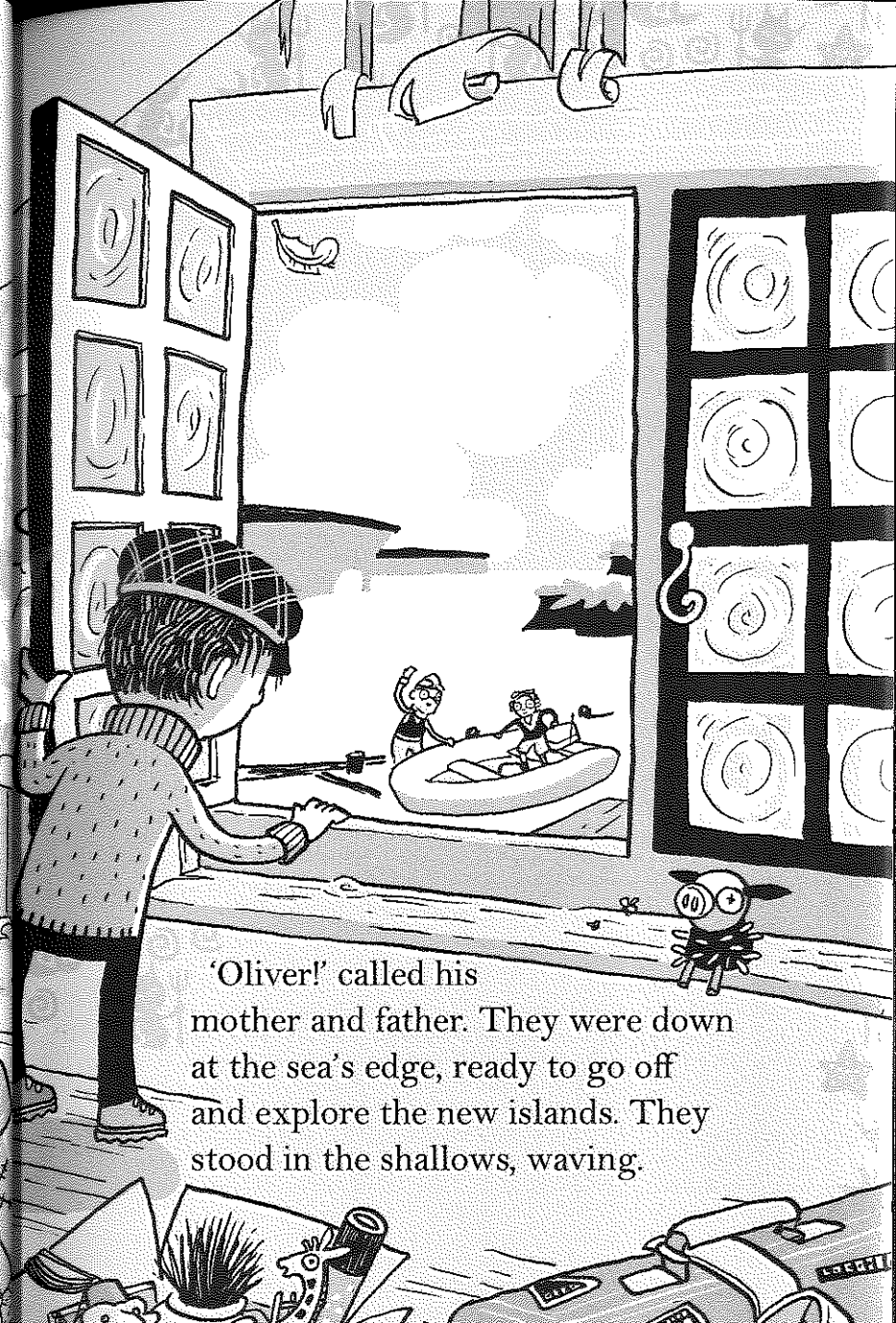
Oliver sighed. He'd seen them like this before, whenever they heard of a vanished city or a forbidden tomb. Still, he thought, at least they can explore these islands from home. He looked happily at the house while Mum,

with her eyes on the islands, started the explorermobile again and took it screeching down the zigzag lane to the beach.



Oliver started unpacking at once. While his mother and father fetched down their inflatable dinghy from the explorermobile's roof, he unlocked the house and carried boxes and bags and suitcases inside. He walked through the big, echoey, dimly familiar rooms, whisking dust sheets off the armchairs which had waited so long for someone to come and sit in them again. He ran

upstairs to his room and bounced on the bed. He loved his room already; the way the sunlight came into it and made a long golden stripe down the wallpaper. He opened the window to let in the air, and the sea wind, and the cries of the gulls.



'Oliver!' called his mother and father. They were down at the sea's edge, ready to go off and explore the new islands. They stood in the shallows, waving.

Their inflatable dinghy tossed between them as the waves broke under it.

'Oliver! Come with us!'

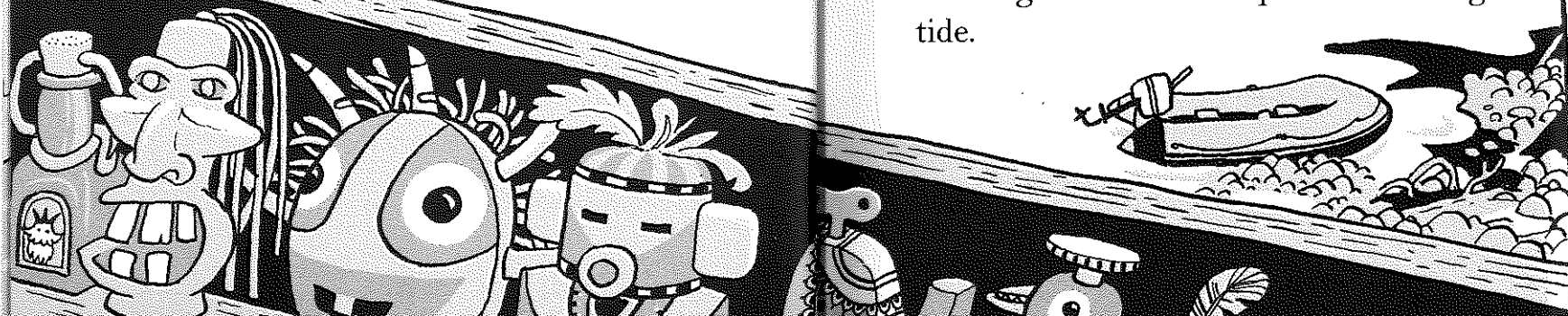
'I'm busy!' Oliver shouted back. 'Why don't you go and have a look around without me? I'll be all right.'

He sighed. He knew his parents loved him. It was just that, sometimes, he had the feeling that they loved exploring more.

The little dinghy's outboard motor drowned out the seagulls with its angry-bee buzz as Mum steered through the surf. It circled a small island just offshore, then took off with a roar across the bay towards the larger ones.

Oliver brought his suitcase upstairs and opened it. Carefully he set out his favourite things on shelves and on the windowsill. He arranged his books on the shelf beside his bed. He hung up his clothes in the cupboard. The bar of sunlight moved along the wall. And suddenly Oliver realized that it was quite a long time since he'd heard the outboard or his parents' voices.

He went to the window and leaned out. Deepwater Bay was deserted, and the evening sun shone golden on the waves. There was no sign of Mum and Dad. The islands had vanished. There was only the orange inflatable dinghy, washing back to shore upon the evening tide.





TWO

Most people would be a bit alarmed to find that their parents had disappeared along with a whole bunch of uncharted islands. They might feel inclined to phone the police, or the coastguard, or just run about shouting. Not Oliver. He was a Crisp, and made of sterner stuff than that. He hadn't panicked when his baby-buggy was carried off by an eagle on the expedition to the Forgotten Mesa.

He hadn't lost his cool when his parents took him on that ill-advised cycling trip around the crater of Mount Firebelly ('But it's supposed to be an *extinct* volcano!' Dad had yelled, while lava-bombs bounced off their cycling helmets.) He had barely batted an eyelid when a bear stole his sleeping bag on the north face of Mount Rainier. He barely batted one now: just ran downstairs and out on to the beach, looking around in case his parents had come ashore without him noticing.

But the beach, in the wintry afternoon sun, was long and empty and completely parent-free. The orange dinghy rasped against the sand, down on the foreshore where the small waves kept spreading neat doilies of foam under it.

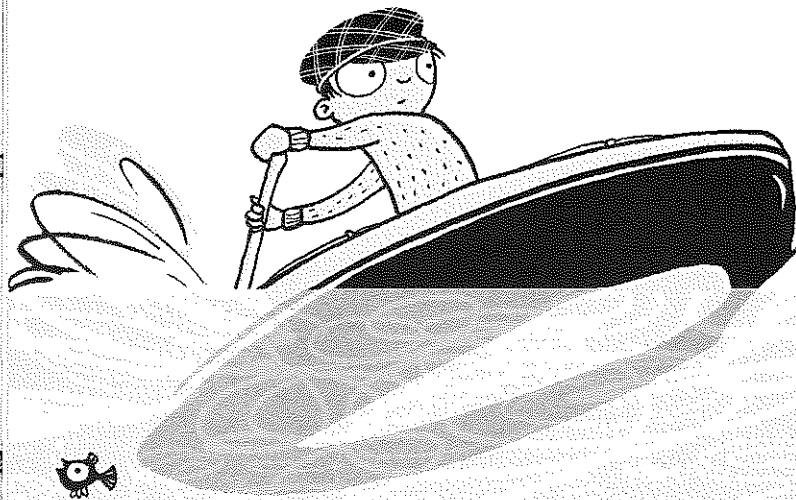
Oliver pulled it further up the beach and wondered what to do. Then he noticed that there was still one island left in the bay. It was the littlest and

lowest and least interesting of them, the one his mum and dad had ignored when they went motoring off to explore the taller ones. Even from the shore, with the low sun shining in his eyes, Oliver could see that they were not on it. But perhaps it held some clue to where they'd gone . . .

He ran back to the explorermobile and packed a rucksack with Useful Things. Then he locked the house up and put a note on the front door which read



How he hoped he would be!



He scampered to where the dinghy waited, and shoved it out into the sea again. *Wap, wap* went the waves, slapping its blunt orange nose. Oliver heaved himself aboard. He couldn't work the outboard motor because his arms weren't strong enough to tug the starter cord, but there were oars stowed neatly on the bottom-boards and he pulled them out and started rowing. It didn't take him long to reach the island, where he



pulled the dinghy up on the sheltered, shoreward side.

The island was just as small as it had looked from the beach. Clumps of greyish grass sighed softly as the sea wind stirred them. There were snaggles of driftwood, festoons of weed, a length of old tarred rope. There was a ramshackle heap of twigs balanced on the pile of boulders which were the highest place on the island. That was all. It took Oliver less than



a minute to walk right across the island to the far shore, where he stood looking out to sea. All his hopes of finding clues faded, like the foam which kept washing around his toes and melting into the wet sand.

'Mum!' he shouted. 'Dad!'

The echoes came back at him from the cliffs around the bay. Echoes, but no reply.

'Mum!' he shouted, louder still. 'Dad!'

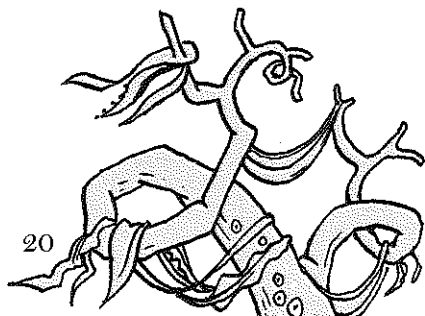
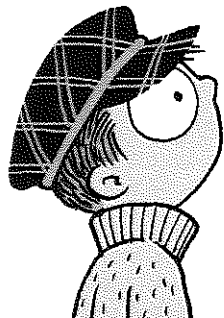
'Oh, put a sock in it, won't you?'

grumbled a creaky voice behind him.

'Some of us are trying to sleep!'

A pair of beady blue eyes were glaring at Oliver over the brim of that twig-heap on the island's crown. The heap was a nest, and the eyes belonged to the bird who owned it.

'But birds don't talk!' protested Oliver.

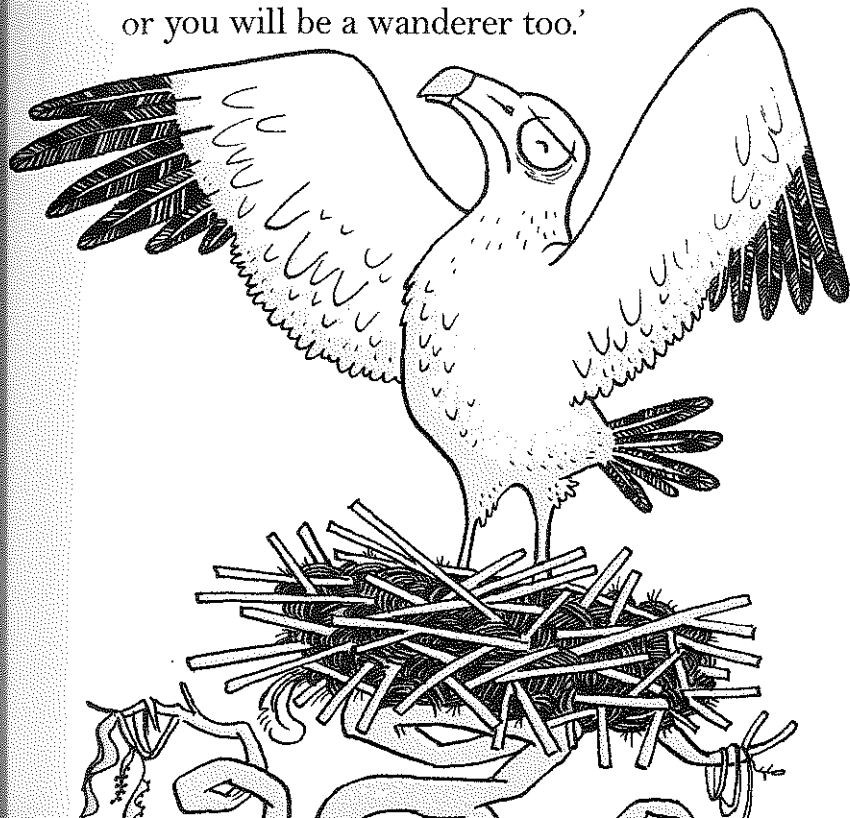


'Parrots do,' the bird said.

'Not really, not properly,' Oliver protested. 'And anyway, you're not a parrot.'

'Indeed I'm not,' the bird sniffed.

It stood up in its nest and spread its enormous, dirty-white wings. 'I am a Wandering Albatross. *Diomedea exulans*. Though you may call me Mr Culpeper. And now you had best get back to shore, or you will be a wanderer too.'



'What does that mean?' wondered Oliver.

'Tsk,' the bird said, 'don't they teach you youngsters anything these days? Not all islands stay where you put them. Some move about. Here one minute, gone the next. This is one of them. That's why I nested on it, of course. I'm not stupid. Why go flapping about the world when I can just roost here and let the island do the wandering?'

Oliver looked down at the island. Between his feet he saw rock, sand, grit, dune-grass and ground-down seashells. It didn't look as if it were going anywhere.

'How do they move?' he asked.

'Who cares?' said Mr Culpeper, shrugging his wings.

'Where are they going?'

'Who knows?' said Mr Culpeper. 'But all the others have gone already, so this one won't stay much longer.'

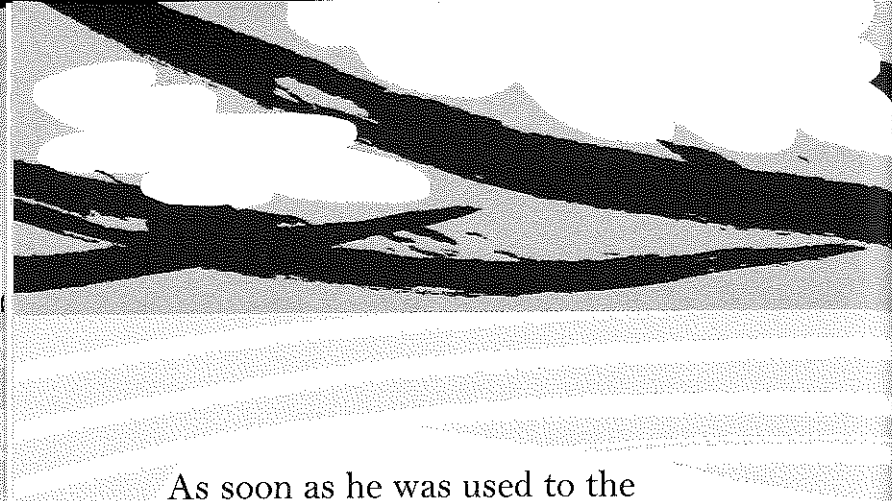
As he spoke, the island shuddered. Small stones spilled and rattled, trickling down.

'Hop in your boat and be off with you,' said the albatross.

'No!' said Oliver. 'Not me. I'm staying. Wherever those islands went, I must go too. My mum and dad were on one of them, you see.'

'That noisy couple?' said Mr Culpeper. 'Suit yourself, but you'd be better off without them, if you want *my* opinion.'

Oliver wasn't listening any more. The island lurched, almost throwing him off his feet. He crouched down. He curled his fingers and toes into the sand like roots, clinging on. The island sank a little. Water bubbled whitely around its edges. Then it turned slowly around and started to move out of Deepwater Bay, following the golden pathway that the evening sun had painted on the waves.



As soon as he was used to the movement, Oliver ran round to where he'd left his boat and made sure it was still safe above the tideline. Looking back, he watched the shore fall swiftly behind. A fiery shard of the sunset reflected for a moment from the window of his own bedroom, and he felt very sad that he would not be sleeping there that night. He almost launched the boat and rowed back to the beach. It was not too far, not quite, not yet . . . But there would be no point in going home without Mum and Dad. Without them, it wasn't really home at all.

So he turned his back on it, and watched



the sun dip down into the western sea, and ate a sandwich.

'What's that you're eating?' asked Mr Culpeper.

'Tuna mayonnaise,' said Oliver.

The albatross snorted. 'New-fangled muck.' He spread his wings and soared out over the ocean in the twilight, dipping down to snatch a fish out of the waves.

Oliver sat watching the empty sea, hoping for a glimpse of the other islands. He watched until it grew too

dark to see anything at all, and then curled up in a grassy space among the rocks, put his rucksack under his head for a pillow, and slept.

All through the night the island kept moving. Oliver slept soundly, soothed by the island's steady motion and the snore of the sea upon its shores. Then, through his dreams, he heard another sound.

'Doof' it went. And, 'Ow!'

Oliver sprang awake. The sky was palest grey, and a few last stars were fading. A wind from the west whispered the grasses.

'Bother!' said someone nearby.

It wasn't Mr Culpeper. The albatross was sleeping still, safe in his scruffy nest with his head stuffed under his wing.

'Mum?' said Oliver hopefully. 'Dad?'

He clambered over the rocks to the beach. There on the shore sat a mermaid, rubbing her nose. 'Who put

this island here?' she asked.

'Not me,' said Oliver.

He had never seen a mermaid before. In fact, he had thought they were just in stories. But then he'd never seen a moving island or a talking *Diomedea exulans* till yesterday, so he wasn't as surprised as he might have been. The mermaid seemed to be about his own age, and she was starting to get a black eye.

'There I was, swimming along, minding my own business,' she said, 'and suddenly there's an island in the way.'



It's a danger to shipping, that's what it is. It's a wonder I wasn't knocked unconscious.'

'Have you seen any other islands?' asked Oliver. 'My mum and dad are on one. I'm looking for them.'

'Sorry,' said the mermaid. 'I didn't even see this one. My eyesight isn't very good. I can hardly see you. Come over here; you're just a blur.'

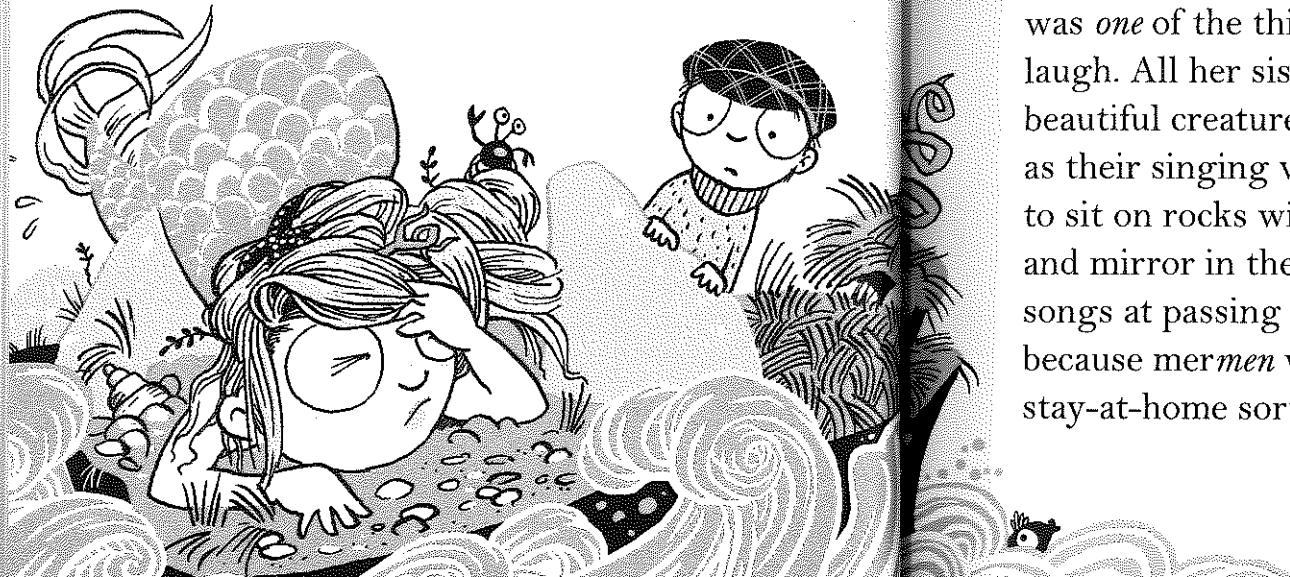
Oliver went closer. The mermaid frowned at him with vague, blue eyes.

'Well,' she said, 'you're an odd-looking character.'

Oliver thought that seemed pretty rich, coming from someone who was at least half fish, but he was a polite boy and did not try to argue. Instead he said, 'My name's Oliver.'

'Mine's Iris,' said the mermaid. 'You don't know of a place called Farsight Cove, do you? I was told there's a beach optician there. That's where I was going when your silly island got in my way.'

This was not the first time her short-sightedness had got Iris into trouble. Apart from anything else, it made other mermaids laugh at her. Well, it was *one* of the things that made them laugh. All her sisters and cousins were beautiful creatures with eyesight as clear as their singing voices, and they liked to sit on rocks with comb in one hand and mirror in the other and sing eerie songs at passing sailors. Perhaps it was because *mermen* were all rather dull, stay-at-home sorts who didn't much like



mermaids' company and preferred to lounge about in their grottoes reading newspapers and discussing the latest finball results. At any rate, the mermaids enjoyed the thought of all those sailors going home and telling everyone about the lovely mermaids who had sung to them, and being haunted by their singing ever after.

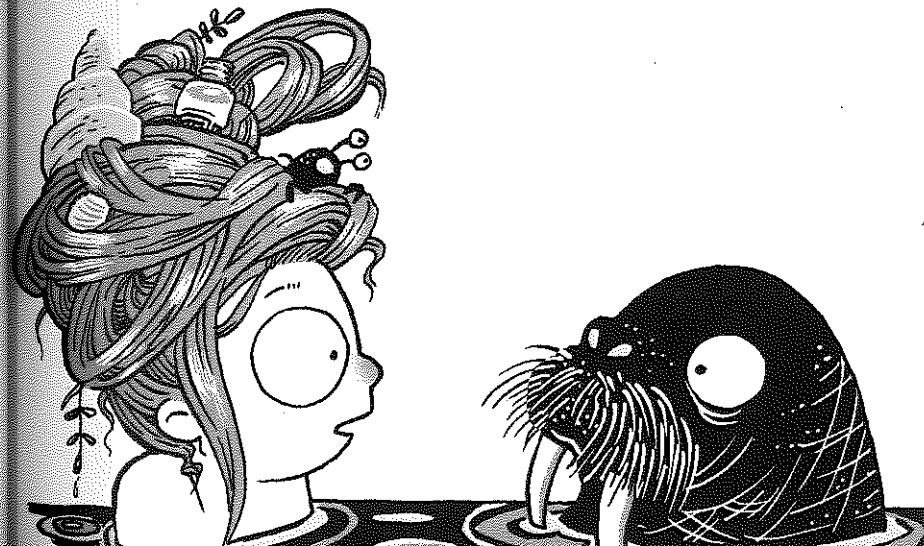
Iris was nothing like that at all. She was rather plump, and she could never remember where she'd put her comb and mirror. She couldn't see the point of sitting on rocks and caterwauling all day. The one time she tried singing to a handsome fisherman in his boat it had turned out not to be a handsome fisherman or a boat at all, just a passing walrus.

'Sorry,' she told it. 'From a distance you looked just like a little brown boat with a man sitting in it.'

'Hmmm,' said the walrus. 'You need to

get your eyes tested, dear.' And it told her about the beach optician at Farsight Cove.

Oliver had heard about this beach optician too. He remembered his mum and dad talking about the dotty old man who wheeled his barrow of eyecharts, instruments and glasses down the path to the cove each day and sat there on the sand, waiting for mermaids. They had laughed and shaken their heads because they didn't believe in mermaids. Oliver looked hard at Iris and decided that there was no way he couldn't believe in her.



'Farsight Cove is quite close to Deepwater Bay . . .' he told her. 'But they must both be miles and miles away by now. This island is moving, you see. It's been moving all night.'

'Of course it has,' said Iris. 'It's one of the Rambling Isles.'

'The *whats?*'

'The Rambling Isles. They're not really islands at all. They're alive, although they're made of stone. They wander the oceans, and they're always getting mistaken for ordinary islands, but really they're more like very big stony giants.'

'Oh,' said Oliver. 'Well, where is it going?'

'How on earth should I know?' asked Iris. 'You really do say the strangest things. I expect it's just rambling around, collecting stuff. That's what Rambling Isles *do*. But I suppose you could always ask it.'

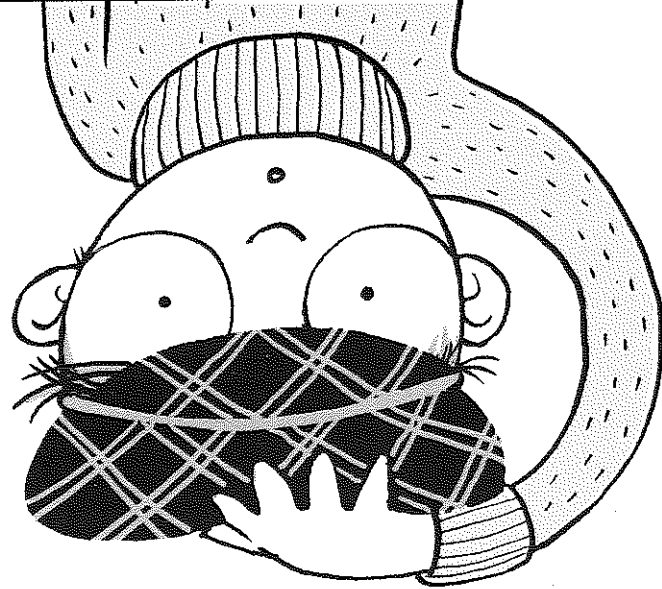
Oliver looked around, bewildered. How could he ask rocks and stones and grass where they were going? Well, he could ask them, but how could he expect them to reply?

'Oh, I'll do it,' said Iris wearily. She slapped the nearest rock as hard as she could. 'Hello?' she shouted.

The movement of the island changed. It slowed, and turned from side to side. Mr Culpeper woke up with a squawk and demanded to know what was happening.

Slowly, the island lifted from the sea. There was a rush and gurgle of falling water draining from its edges. It rose cliff-high and the waves rolled past it far below. Oliver went to its raggedy edge and looked over.

He saw that the island was really just the top of a vast, stony head. The grass was its hair.



Water ran down its face; limpets
stubbled its cheeks; seaweed and old
carrier bags were tangled in its bushy
eyebrows. Two big eyes peered up at
Oliver.





THREE

Oliver was startled (and Oliver was *not* a boy who startled easily). 'It's got a face!' he said.

'Of course it's got a face,' said Iris. Oliver waved at the Rambling Isle. 'Um . . . ' he said.

'Hello,' Iris told it. 'He wants to know where you're going.'

The Rambling Isle watched them thoughtfully. It wasn't used to being talked to. It was years and years since it had spoken. It hadn't even realized that there was anybody on its head until

these two small upside-down faces appeared.

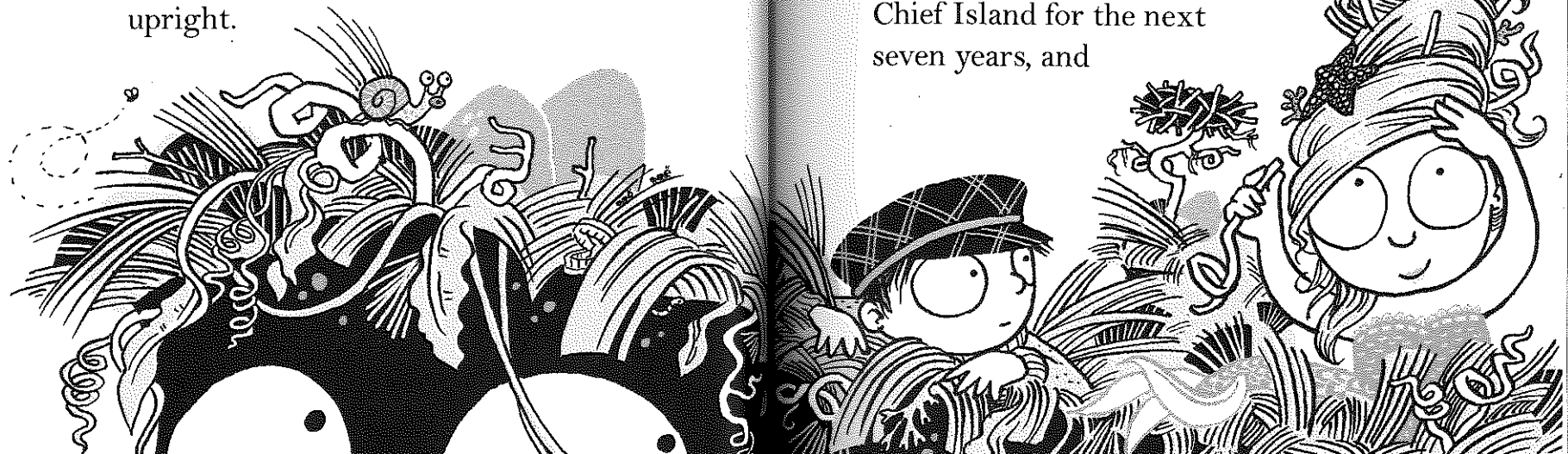
'Please,' said Oliver, 'I have to find those other islands. My mum and dad were on one. That's why I need to know where you're all going.'

The Rambling Isle opened its cave of a mouth. It cleared its throat with a crumbly rumble like masses of rock shearing and shifting deep in the earth. 'They are all going to the Hallowed Shallows,' it said, 'for the Night of the Seawigs.'

Oliver was starting to feel dizzy, hanging upside down like that. He sat upright.

'What's a Seawig?' he asked.

'Haven't you heard?' said Iris. 'Every seven years the Rambling Isles all gather together at the Hallowed Shallows to show off their treasures. They love to collect things, you see; all the bits of flotsam that the sea washes up on their heads. They're very proud of their collections. On the Night of the Seawigs, each of them wears a wig made of all the treasures it has gathered on its travels. The one with the finest wig is declared the winner. It is a great honour. Everyone makes a huge fuss of them. They become Chief Island for the next seven years, and



they get to order the other islands about if they want to, and choose all the best bits of wig for themselves.'

'I bet Thrumcap wins this time,' said the island. 'Or Dimsey. They always have the best seawigs. Of course, *they* have crinkly, complicated coastlines. All sorts of interesting things get stuck on *them*. Most of what washes up on my shores washes straight off again. Look at me! All I have to show for my wanderings are a few bits of old rope and a stupid bird's nest.'

Oliver tried to think of something encouraging he could say that would cheer up the poor island, but it was true: its wig was a mess. Its summit was mostly bald rock, with those tussocks of grassy hair sprouting here and there, and rather a lot of albatross poo, now that Oliver came to look critically at it.

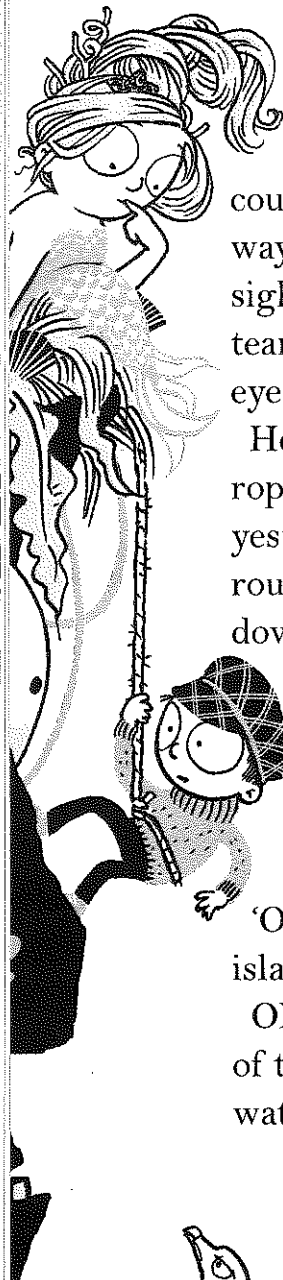
'Who are you talking to?' asked Mr Culpeper, stalking importantly down

the beach. 'And whose nest is he calling stupid?'

'I don't even know whether I can be bothered making the journey,' the island went on, in its deep and mournful voice. 'You can't imagine the wonderful seawigs which will be on display at the Hallowed Shallows. And there I'll be, with my bit of rope and my bird's nest. The others will all laugh at me. Perhaps I'll just give it a miss this time.'

'No!' said Oliver. He hung over the beach edge again. 'You must go! Or at least tell me how to get there, so I can find Mum and Dad!'

'Oh, it's not a place you could get to,' said Iris airily. 'Not on your own.' She hung upside down beside him with her wet hair dangling. 'The Hallowed Shallows aren't that sort of place at all. They are the place where all the old things of the sea went to live once people in your world stopped believing



in them. Actually they are where I live too, only I came out to find that optician, and I couldn't, and now I can't find my way home either.' She blinked short-sightedly. Oliver thought he saw tears beginning to gather in her eyes.

He fetched the oily length of nylon rope he'd noticed on the tideline yesterday. He tied one end firmly round a rock, then lowered himself down in front of

the island's face.

'Did you hear that?' he said.

'We both need to go to the Hallowed Shallows. Please say you'll take us there.'

'Oh, I don't know . . .' said the island, glumly.

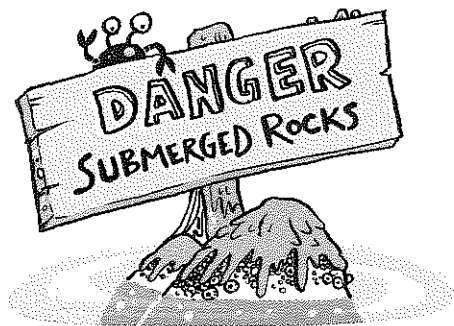
Oliver frowned, swaying in front of those huge eyes like a hypnotist's watch. 'Look, do you have a name?'

he asked.

'Me?' said the island, dolefully. 'A name? No. Some of the bigger Rambling Isles have been mistaken for real islands by sailors and explorers, who gave them the most splendid names, but no one ever noticed me.'

'Not at all?' said Iris.

'Well, someone put a sign up on me once, when I went to sleep for a few years near the mouth of a river.



But it fell off. Anyway, I can't go around calling myself "Danger: Submerged Rocks", can I?'

'Well, you need a name,' said Oliver, looking up at those craggy features, at

the clinging barnacles and clumps of weed. 'I'm going to call you . . . Cliff.'

'Cliff . . .' said the island, trying it out. He sounded pleased. '*Cliff* . . .'

'Now listen, Cliff,' said Oliver. 'How long is it till this Seawigs contest?'

'We gather at the Shallows tomorrow night,' said Cliff.

Iris nodded. 'That's right. All my mermaid friends are going. They're going to perch on rocks and sing; it's completely lame.'

'Well then, Cliff,' said Oliver, 'you've got all of today and tomorrow to gather some really brilliant things to decorate your seawig. We'll help!'

'Will you?' sniffed the poor island, looking hopefully at him.

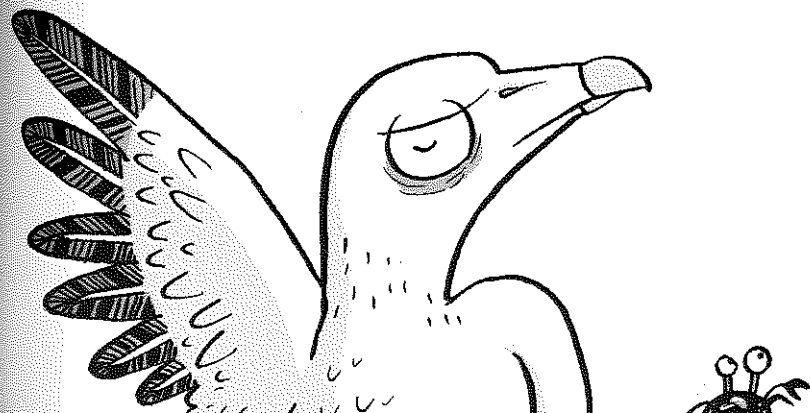
'Will we?' asked Iris.

'Course we will,' said Oliver. 'Let's think. What would be the best things you could possibly have on your wig? You've already got me, and Iris, and the

inflatable dinghy . . .'

'He's got an albatross, too,' said Iris. 'It can stand on the top and spread its wings or something.'

'Excuse me,' said Mr Culpeper, coming to peer over the edge beside her. 'I am *Diomedea exulans*, I am, and a particularly fine specimen, too. I am not some funfair attraction! "Spread its wings", indeed.' He sniffed loudly. 'It seems to me that this island has gone to the dogs. It used to be such a nice, quiet place. Now I can hardly move for boys and mermaids. I don't like the sound of this Seawigs affair at all. It sounds like a lot of noise and bother to me.'



'Don't listen to him,' Oliver told the island. 'Just think! What are the most wonderful things that an island could wear?'

'Well, there's always shipwrecks,' said Cliff. 'Shipwrecks are very stylish.'

'The dinghy is a sort of wreck,' Oliver pointed out.

'It's just stranded,' said Cliff sadly. 'That's not the same thing at all.'

'He's right,' said Iris dreamily, draping her tail in a rock pool. 'What he needs is a really spectacular wreck. What about the *Water Mole*?'

Oliver frowned. 'I've heard of that. It was the world's first submarine. The king of Spain built it to ferry treasure from his gold mines without English pirates noticing, but it didn't work too well. It sank, and nobody knows where.'

Iris coughed, and pointed modestly to herself.

'You mean, you know where we could

find it?' Oliver asked.

'I ran into it while I was swimming around,' Iris said, rubbing thoughtfully at a fading bruise upon her elbow. 'It's on an undersea mountain not far from here.'

'Ooh, a submarine?' said Cliff, sounding hopeful for the first time. 'I don't think any of the other islands has a submarine!'

'Well, let's go and find the *Water Mole* then,' said Oliver, 'and then hurry to the Hallowed Shallows and see what those other isles think of it! I bet they'll declare you the winner in an instant!'

Cliff nodded happily, almost tumbling his two passengers off into the sea. He'd never really thought of himself as a winner of anything before, but Oliver spoke with such certainty that he could almost hear the voices of his fellow Rambling Isles as they cheered his wonderful wig. He sank back down

into the waves until the top of his stony head became an island once again, and with Iris shouting directions he set off, surging through the water with a steady, confident motion.

Oliver lay on the edge of the beach



and looked down through the water. He could dimly see Cliff's huge, rocky limbs moving far beneath him in the depths. How strange to think there were such things as Rambling Isles in the world, and he had never even heard of them!





FOUR

After Cliff had been striding along for an hour or two, Oliver saw a shape on the sea ahead. Then another. They looked like small, stony islands, but he couldn't be certain of that any more. He pointed the islands out to Iris. 'Are they more Rambling Isles?'

The mermaid peered in the direction he was pointing. 'I think they were once,' she said. 'But they've settled down.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means just what it sounds like.'

Some of them lose the urge to keep wandering. They give up collecting bits and pieces for their seawigs. And once they stop moving they sort of take root; silt and sand pile up around their feet, and weed grows on them, and coral, and there they stay.'

One of the settled islands was quite close now. Looking down through the waves, Oliver thought he could see its stony face, blurred by weed and masked with barnacles.

'Are they dead?' he asked. 'Or just asleep?'

'They're settled,' said Iris. 'They are just islands now.'

'I hope Cliff never settles,' said Oliver. 'I like him rambling about. I wouldn't want him to be just an island.'

'Oh, don't worry,' said Iris, and swished her tail in the rock pool, cleaning the sand from between her scales. 'Once he has the *Water Mole* on top of him he'll

win for sure. It's completely brilliant.'

Oliver nodded, hoping she was right. Then a bad thought struck him. 'Iris? How can you find your way back to this submarine wreck if you can't even find your own way home?'

'I can smell it, silly,' said Iris. 'It's in a very smelly patch of sea. Can't *you* smell it yet?'

Oliver sniffed. Sure enough there was a scent on the air of green things growing and rotting.

Hour after hour the scent grew stronger, and that afternoon they saw a darkness that lay like a green shadow on the sea ahead. Soon it stretched from horizon to horizon. As they entered its outer fringes Oliver realized that the whole face of the ocean was clogged with drifting weed.

'We must be in the Sargasso Sea!' he said excitedly. 'Sailors fear it because their ships get becalmed here, and the

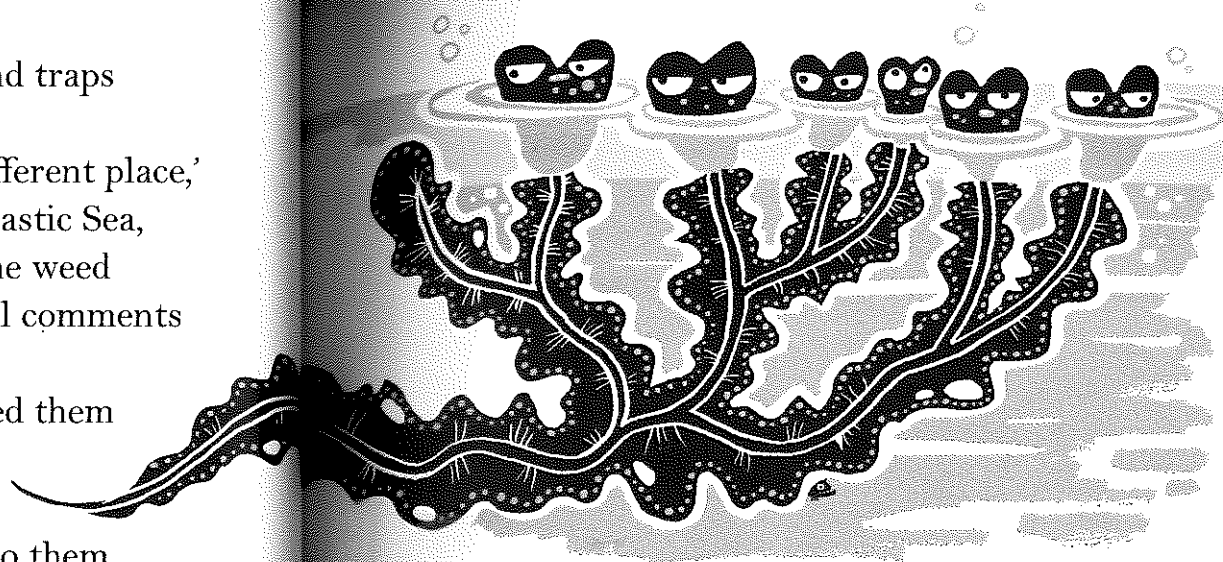
weed tangles round them and traps them.'

'No, this is a completely different place,' said Iris. 'It's called the Sarcastic Sea, and sailors fear it because the weed keeps making horrid, hurtful comments about them.'

Sure enough, as Cliff carried them deeper into the weed, they began to hear its little mocking voices calling out to them.

'Oh, a *mermaid!* That's *just* what we need!' and 'Nice seawig, mate!' and 'I love the inflatable dinghy . . . Orange is such a *tasteful* colour.' And you could tell that it didn't mean any of the things it said, in fact it meant exactly the opposite, and all its comments were followed by scornful sniggers, or whispery conversations that ended in laughter. The weed of the Sarcastic Sea was very sarcastic weed indeed.

As Cliff ploughed onwards



great clumps of the stuff began piling up on the beach, and Oliver noticed that as well as the little bladders that helped to keep ordinary types of seaweed afloat its strands were dotted with beady eyes, which all looked witheringly at him. He took out his notebook and made a sketch, knowing that his mum and dad would be interested when he found them.

Ooh, nice notebook

said the bit of weed which he was drawing.

I wish I could draw like that ...

said another bit.

NOT!

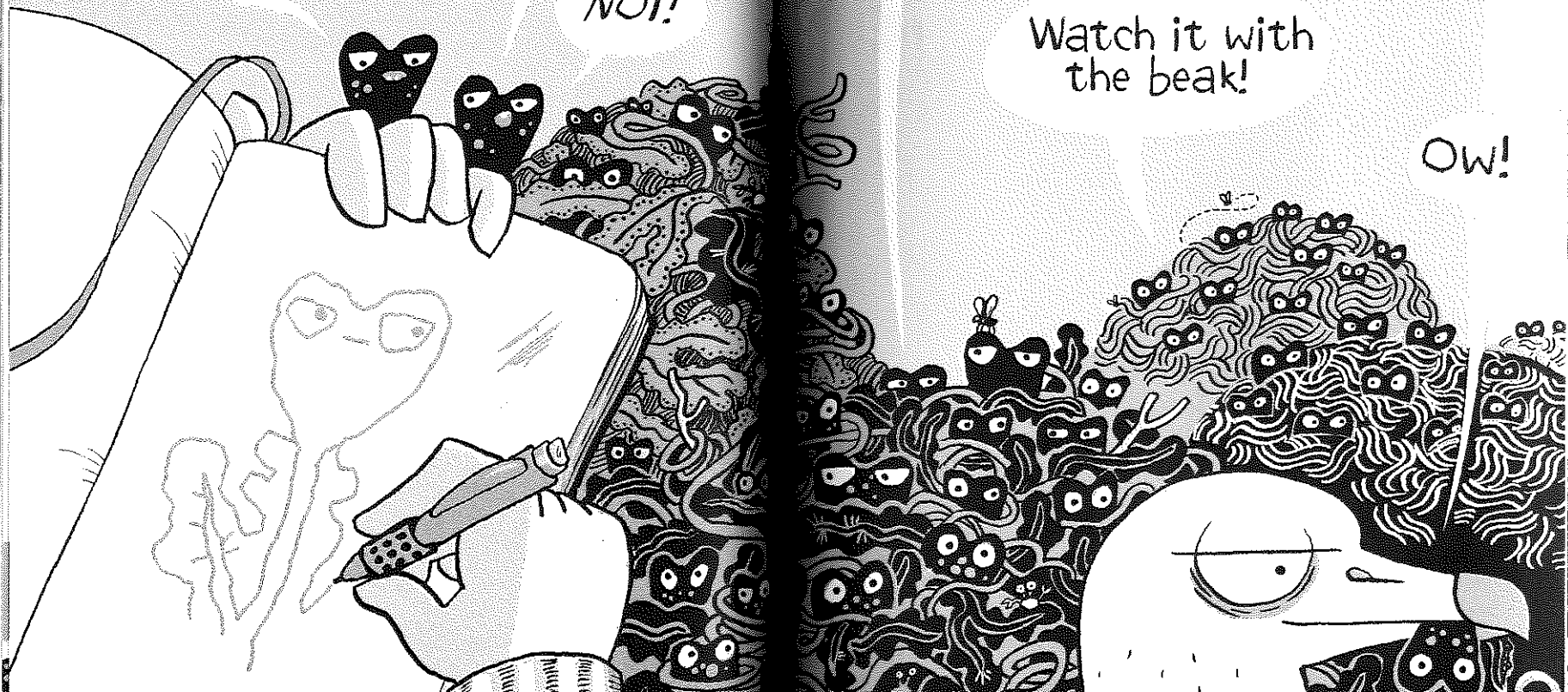
But the weeds did not much like being snagged on Cliff's beaches, because once they were out of the waves Mr Culpeper stalked around pecking at the tiny crabs and water bugs which lived amongst them.

Oi!

they squeaked.

Watch it with the beak!

Ow!



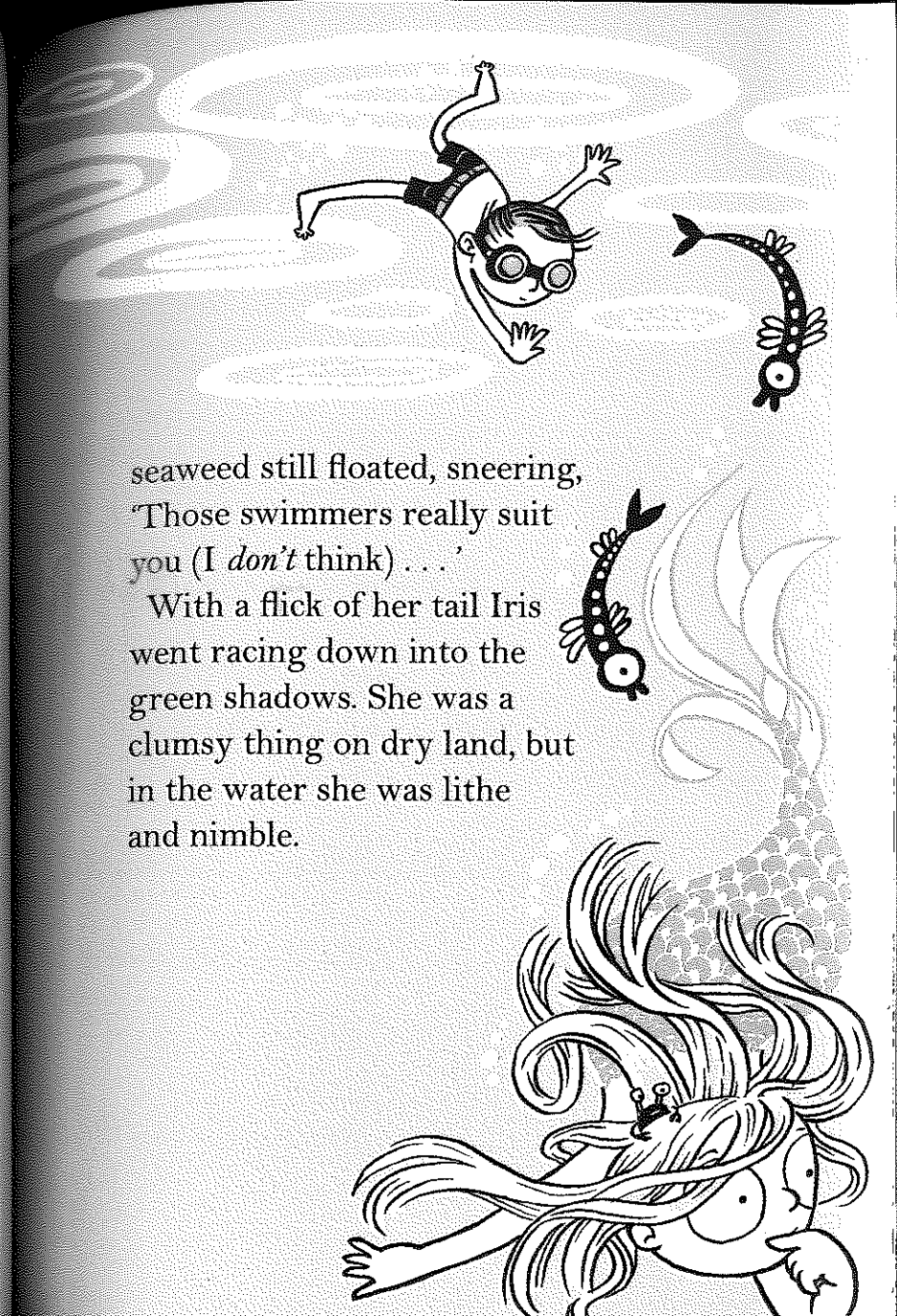
Oliver felt sorry for the weed, and he and Iris began making their way around Cliff's shores, shovelling it back into the waves and getting precious little thanks. The floating weed soon learned to keep out of the way of the oncoming island. It drew back to make a path for Cliff, and by the time Iris told him to stop, there was a broad patch of clear water all around him.

'This is the place,' the mermaid said.

'Are you sure?' asked Oliver. This bit of the Sarcastic Sea looked just the same as all the rest to him.

'Two currents meet here,' replied Iris primly. 'The sea smells different. The *Water Mole* is right beneath us. Come and see for yourself, if you don't believe me.'

So Oliver fetched his swimming things and goggles, took a deep breath, and plunged after Iris into the waves, where a few small, left-behind strands of



seaweed still floated, sneering, 'Those swimmers really suit you (I *don't* think) . . .'

With a flick of her tail Iris went racing down into the green shadows. She was a clumsy thing on dry land, but in the water she was lithe and nimble.

Oliver struggled after her, down past Cliff's huge, watchful face till, far below, he started to make out the summits of drowned mountains rising dimly from the ocean deeps.

By the time he saw them, the breath that Oliver had taken before he dived had almost run out. His eyes bulged and his heart hammered. Bubbles seeped from the corners of his mouth and swam towards the surface like silver jellyfish. Then, in the last instant before he had to follow them, he glimpsed the wreck. The *Water Mole* lay on the rocky top of one of those mountains. Weed and coral had transformed its hull into a strange underwater cathedral. Fish darted in and out of the shattered windows at the stern, and an eel as stripy as a gypsy's stocking had tied itself like a bow around the figurehead.

Iris bumped into the cabin, groped her way up a ladder, and perched on the top,

beaming up at Oliver as if to say, 'I told you so!' But Oliver could stay no longer in her underwater world. He kicked his legs and shot back to the surface in a rush of bubbles, bursting out into the sunshine and taking deep gulps of fresh, delicious air.

Cliff rose out of the sea beside him, with falls of white water cascading off his brow.

'It's there!' said Oliver, treading water in front of the island's nose. 'It's lovely! It will make an *awesome* wig!'

But how were they to lift it? Raising wrecks was difficult, Oliver knew that. He'd seen Cliff's clumsy, stony hands. He was afraid they'd crush the *Water Mole* to splinters if Cliff simply tried to pick it up.

'You must go down to it,' he said.

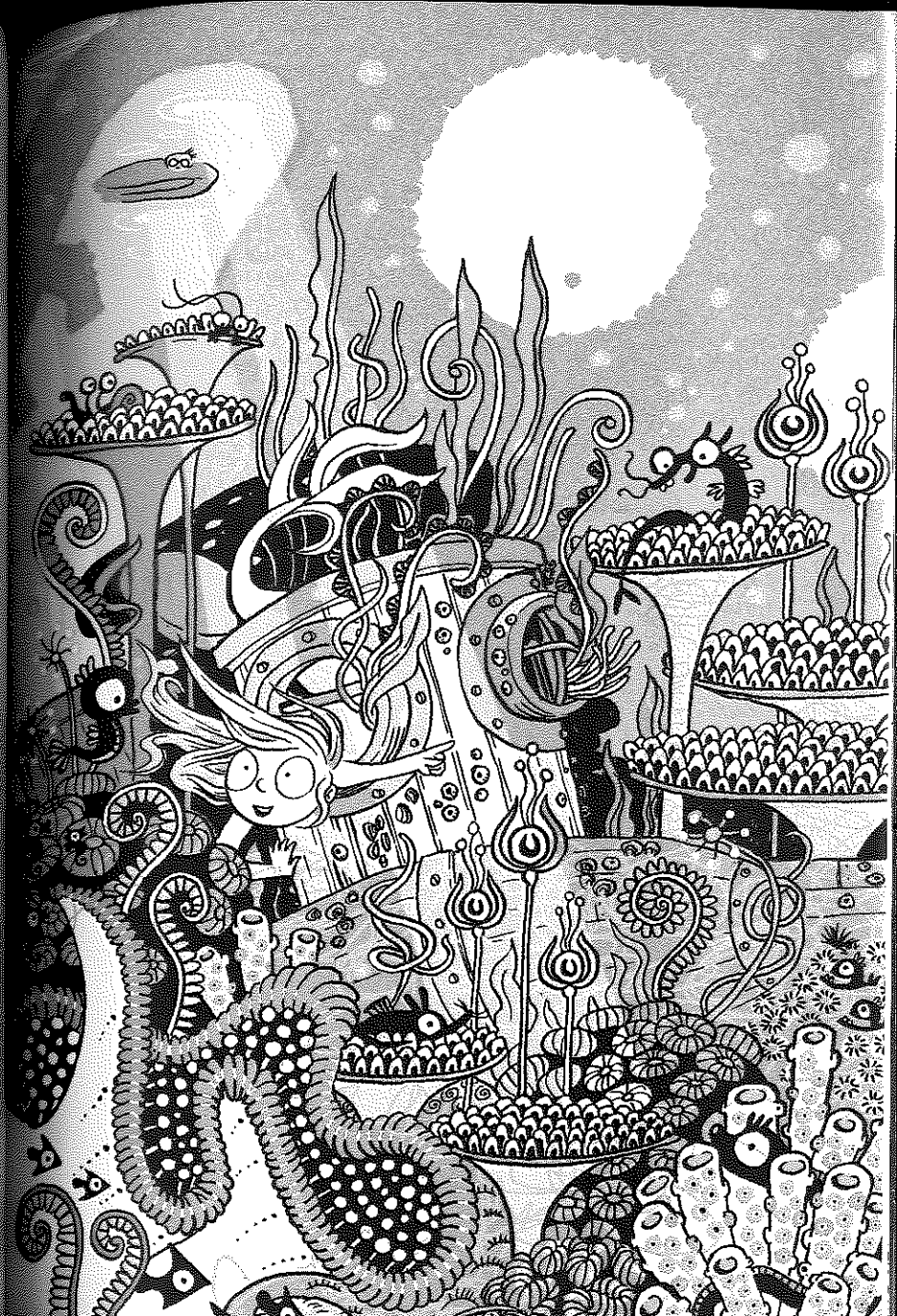
'Go under the sea?' said Cliff, eyes widening. 'But what about my sands? My shells? My bits of rope? They'll all

wash off if I go under!

'And more to the point, what about *my* nest?' demanded Mr Culpeper, circling above Oliver's head.

'I know!' said Oliver. He scrambled back up onto Cliff's beach and quickly gathered anything that looked as if it might float away, including the albatross's nest. He dumped it all into the dinghy and then climbed in with it.

Then, while Iris swam about below directing things (she wasn't much help because her eyesight was even worse under water than it was above, but she liked to feel important) Cliff knelt down on his gigantic underwater knees and let the waves of the Sarcastic Sea swirl over his head. Oliver put on his goggles again and hung over the edge of his dinghy with his face in the sea as the waters lifted it. Down in the green gloom far below he saw Cliff carefully edge his way towards the wreck, and glimpsed the



flash of Iris's rainbow tail as she circled, gesturing at Cliff to move left a bit, right a bit, stop, come forward . . . (She didn't realize that she had her back to Cliff. She was actually gesturing at a confused-looking whale which just happened to be passing.)

Cliff went right up to the wreck. He nudged it with his head and tugged at it with his stumpy, stony arms. At last it shifted and rolled gently sideways. Oliver jumped up. 'That's it!' he hooted, although Oliver knew the Rambling Isle couldn't hear him. 'You've done it! Now come up!'

Cliff settled the weight of the ancient submarine on his head and began to rise, carefully, carefully, with swirls of sand glittering in the sea around him. He came up under the dinghy in a great roaring and rushing and bubbling of water and a flopping and floundering of stranded fishes. Most of them were

washed back into the sea as Cliff continued to rise and the waters poured off him. Soon there was beach beneath Oliver's dinghy again. On the top of Cliff's head lay the *Water Mole*, all wet and startling and shiny in the sunlight. The striped eel had slithered off and the gilded bowsprit glimmered faintly, pointing at the sky.

It was the finest wig an island ever wore.

'Yay!' shouted Oliver, jumping out of the dinghy and doing a victory dance among the rock pools.

'Yay!' said Iris, flopping ashore and wringing out her hair.

'Yay!' rumbled Cliff, and 'Yay!' cawed Mr Culpeper. Only the sarcastic strands of floating weed were unimpressed.

'Showy,' they complained, still keeping a safe distance from Cliff's shores.

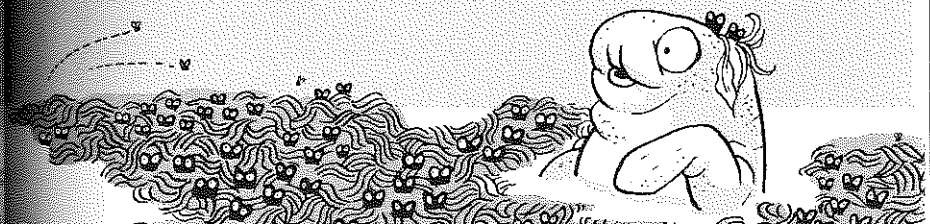
'Shipwrecks are *so* last season.' But they were only seaweed, so who cared what

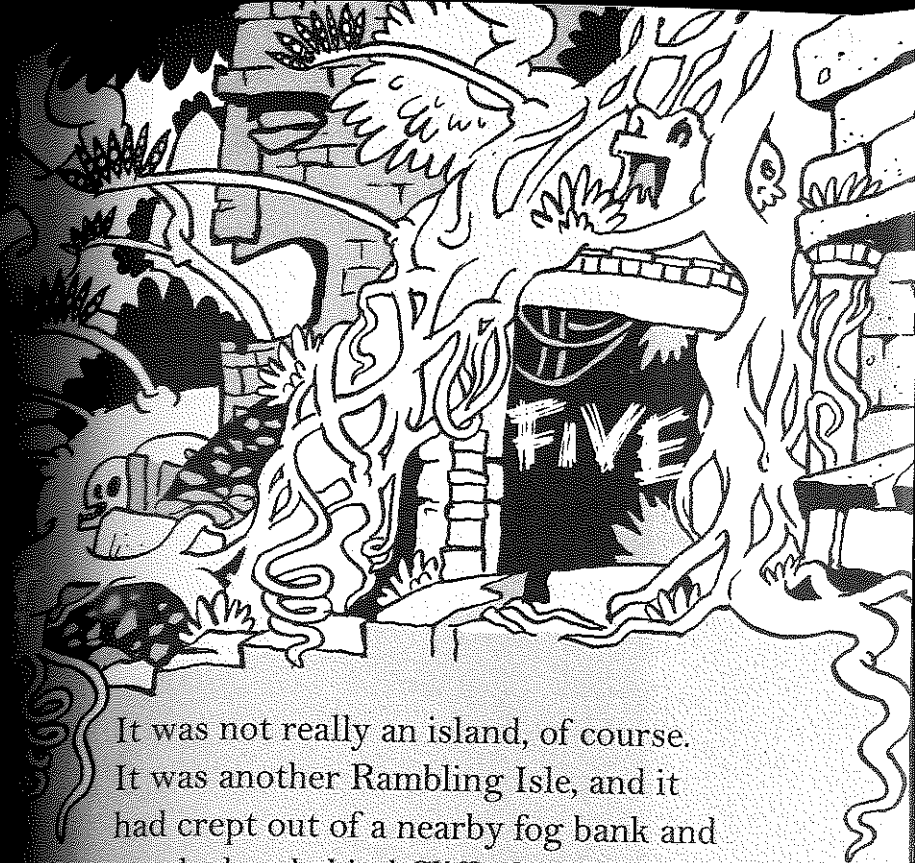


they thought?

Then Mr Culpeper, gliding down to perch on the coral-encrusted flagstaff, said suddenly, 'What's that?'

Oliver turned to look. There behind him on the weedy sea, an island stood. He could not believe that he hadn't noticed it before.





It was not really an island, of course. It was another Rambling Isle, and it had crept out of a nearby fog bank and sneaked up behind Cliff while everyone was distracted by the raising of the submarine.

Although Oliver did not recognize it, it was one of the same islands which had been resting in Deepwater Bay the day his parents disappeared. He had not been able to see it from his bedroom window

because the headland hid it, but Mr and Mrs Crisp had seen it as they motored away from the beach in their dinghy, and had steered straight towards it, because they could tell at once that it was easily the most interesting.

It was tall and rocky, and on its summit dark trees clustered. Among the trees stood a ruined temple, crumbly and overgrown. Around the temple towered huge stone heads with empty eyes and open mouths. They looked a bit like the famous statues on Easter Island. (In fact they were where the Easter islanders had got the idea from, for this Rambling Isle had passed close to Easter Island, long ago.)

'Remarkable!' Oliver's dad had shouted, as the dinghy bounced across the waves of Deepwater Bay. 'Polynesian? Pre-Columbian?'

'A whole unknown civilization!' declared Oliver's mum, snapping photos

of those weird stone heads as the dinghy swept into the island's shadow and circled it, searching for a place to land.

There was a beach on the seaward side. A beach of black sand, with steps carved in the cliff behind it, winding up past crumbled walls and watchful statues to those intriguing ruins on the summit.

Poor foolish Crisps! They were so eager to explore that they did not bother dragging their dinghy up above the tideline, which everyone knows is one of the first rules of exploring. They just left it there upon the shining sand and ran up those stairs. The clicking of their cameras echoed among the ruins, and so did their excited cries, until they reached the ruined temple.

It was not quite as ruined as it had looked from sea-level. Someone had put double glazing in its windows, and a chimney poked from the roof, puffing

out little curlicues of woodsmoke.

'Oh! This island is inhabited!' said Oliver's dad, trying not to sound too disappointed, even though he had hoped to be the first person to discover a lost civilization.

'But inhabited by whom?' asked his wife, imagining lost tribes, priest-kings, and ancient wisdom.

That was when the island shivered. That was when it shook. 'Earthquake!' cried Mrs Crisp, and 'Volcano!' yelled her husband. The island sank a little. Down on its shore, waves swirled up the beach, lifted the abandoned dinghy, and carried it gently out into the bay. And from the open mouths of all those stone heads there came a noise: a rustling, a whispering, a scrabbling, a jostling, a strange, demented jabbering that grew louder and louder as the island started moving out to sea . . .

And now here it stood, a few hundred yards from Cliff, with Oliver staring at it in surprise.

'Look at all those creepy old heads!' said Iris.

Cliff turned beneath them, looking. 'Oh dear!' he rumbled. 'Oh no! It's the Thurlstone!'

'What's the Thurlstone?' asked Oliver.

'It is very old, and very bad,' Cliff said. 'Bad men did human sacrifices in that temple on its top long ago, and the blood trickled down inside it and turned it wicked. They say it's quite hollow, and rotten to the core. Oh dear!'

The Thurlstone lifted itself a little way out of the water. Massive weedy shoulders rose into the sunlight. Water drained out through cracks and fissures in the isle's sides. Its mean black eyes stared hard at Cliff through veils of falling water. A mouth like a sea-cave opened and a stony voice said, 'Nice

shipwreck you have there.'

'It's ours!' Iris shouted back. 'We found it!'

Her voice sounded very small and thin and shrill after the thunder of the Thurlstone's. It boomed again. 'Don't like the mermaid, though,' it said. 'Mermaids are vulgar.'

Now that he came to look properly at it, Oliver saw that the

Thurlstone was wearing quite an elaborate seawig. Loads of plaited seaweed were arranged around

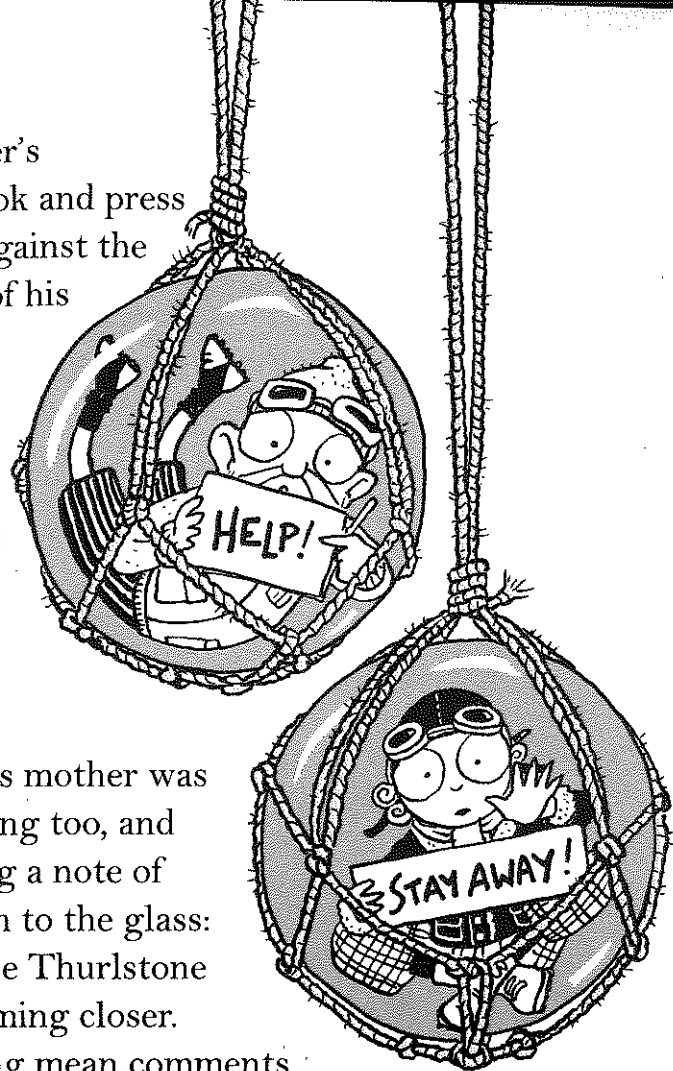


its cliffs, glittering with bits of broken glass and shiny metal. Old flip-flops dangled from the branches of those dark and twisted trees, and among the rocks where the temple stood a trawler and a rusty battleship were perched. From the cliffs on either side of its face two big glass globes dangled in cradles of knotted rope, like earrings, or baubles on a Christmas tree. Inside the globes, something moved.

Oliver snatched his rucksack and ferreted inside it for his binoculars. He focused on one of those glassy dangles. The thing inside it was his mum. He yelped, and swung the binoculars. There inside the other globe was Dad.

The explorers seemed quite unharmed. Oliver began to jump up and down on the beach. He waved and shouted. When he looked through the binoculars again he saw that his mum had spotted him. He saw his dad scribble something in his

explorer's notebook and press it flat against the inside of his glass prison for Oliver to read:



Now his mother was scribbling too, and pressing a note of her own to the glass:

But the Thurlstone was coming closer.

Ignoring mean comments and backhanded compliments from the floating weed, it shouldered its way through the sea.

Octopuses writhed their tentacles among its eyebrows, and a shark fell out of its nose like a fierce bogey. Up on its forehead a little platform had been built, and there a boy stood, looking down.

The Thurlstone was so close by then that Oliver didn't need his binoculars any more. He could see the boy quite clearly without them. He was older than Oliver: a tall teenager, balancing precariously on beansprout legs and about to tumble clumsily into adulthood. He wore sea-boots and a sailor's uniform with all sorts of gold braid and medals and fancy finery all over it.

When the gap of open water between Cliff and the Thurlstone had narrowed to a stone's throw the Thurlstone stopped in a swirl of foam and spoke again. 'Want it,' it said, staring at the *Water Mole*.

Up on its brow the boy picked up a big brass megaphone and bellowed through it.

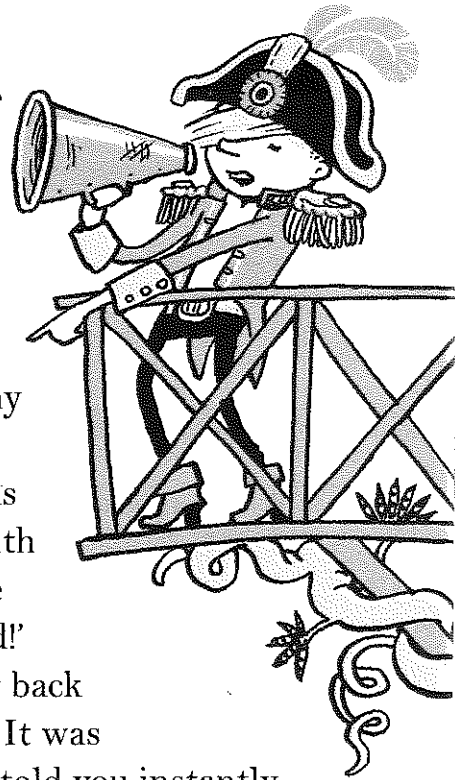
MY ISLAND WANTS THAT
WRECK OF YOURS. YOU'D
BETTER HAND IT OVER.

'Ooh, of all the cheek!' squealed Iris. 'We found it! It's ours!'

'You're not having my wig!' rumbled Cliff.

Oliver just cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, 'Give me back my mum and dad!'

The other boy threw back his head and laughed. It was the sort of laugh that told you instantly he was not about to let poor Mr and Mrs Crisp go. 'Ha ha ha!' he cackled. 'So they are yours are they? Well, you should have taken better care of them. They make nice additions to the Thurlstone's seawig, don't you think? But not as nice as that fine submarine your island's found. Hand it over, now, and spare



yourself a lot of unpleasantness.'

'Who are you, anyway?' asked Iris.
'You're very full of yourself.'

'My name,' the boy said importantly, 'is Stacey de Lacey.'

'But that's a girl's name!' blurted Oliver.

Stacey de Lacey's face turned a dark shade of red. 'Silence!' he shouted.

'Stacey is one of those names that can be for a boy or a girl! Like Hilary, or Leslie, or . . . um . . . Anyway, when the Night of the Seawigs rolls around, my Thurlstone shall have the finest wig of all! That submarine is just the thing we need to top it off, and if you won't give it to us, we shall just have to take it!'

'Mad,' said Iris in an undertone, 'quite mad.'

Stacey de Lacey clapped his hands.
'Come, my lovelies!' he shouted, and laughed with wicked glee.

From the giant statues which grinned and gurned upon the Thurlstone's head

there came a rustling, a whispering, a scrabbling, a jostling, a strange, demented jabbering . . .

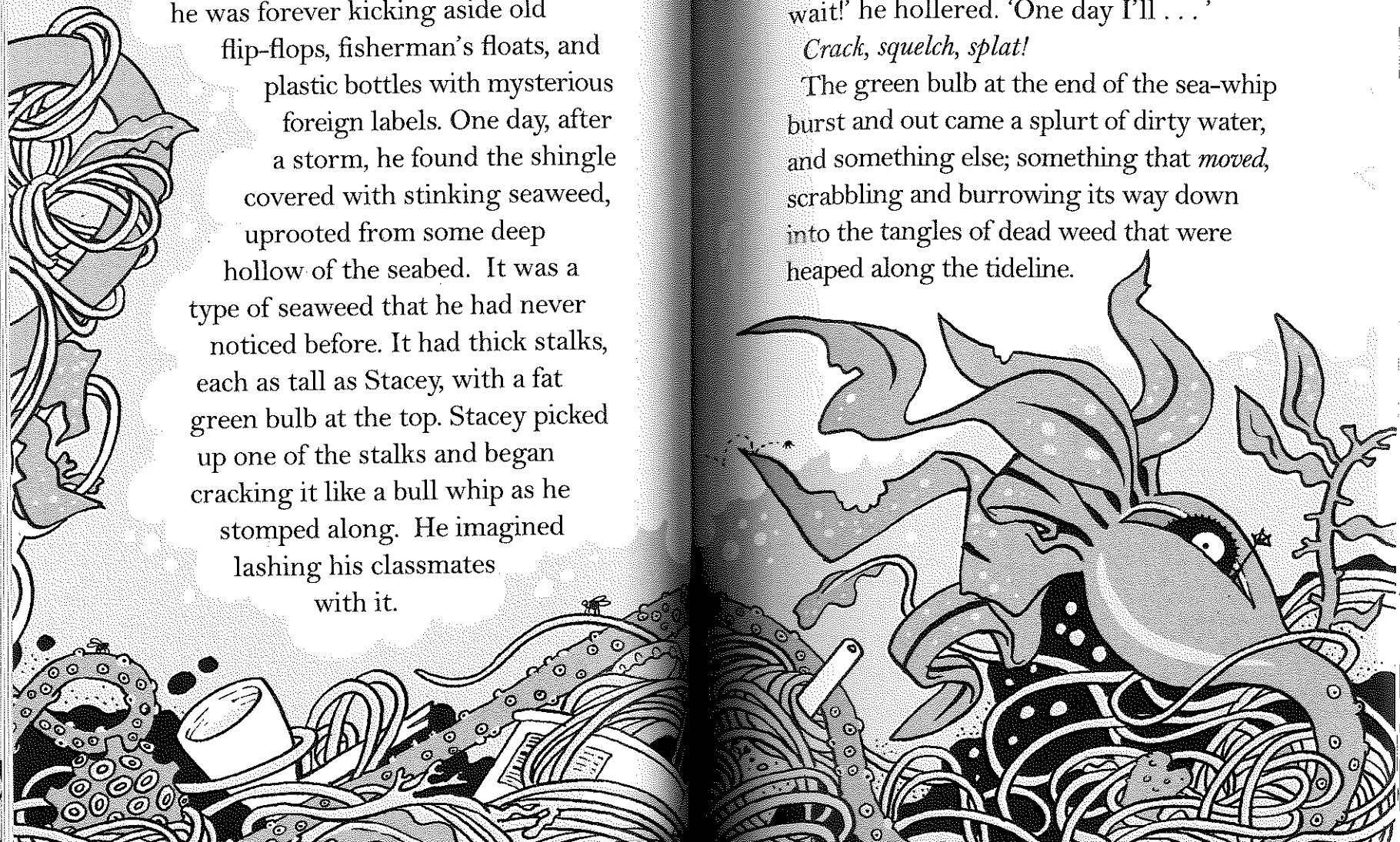
No wonder Stacey de Lacey sounded gleeful. It was quite a new feeling for him, giving orders. When he'd been growing up, nobody had ever taken much notice of him. His parents, who were rich and busy, barely paid him any attention. The other children at school all hated him. And why did they hate him? Well, actually it was because he was a nasty, boastful bully, but Stacey didn't realize that: he was sure it was just because of his name. 'Stacey can be a boy's name too,' he would tell them, when they laughed at it. They never believed him. Angry and all alone, he took long walks on the beach near his house, dreaming of the terrible revenge he would take on them all when he was older.

All sorts of things washed up on that beach. As Stacey de Lacey strode along with his hands in his pockets he was forever kicking aside old flip-flops, fisherman's floats, and plastic bottles with mysterious foreign labels. One day, after a storm, he found the shingle covered with stinking seaweed, uprooted from some deep hollow of the seabed. It was a type of seaweed that he had never noticed before. It had thick stalks, each as tall as Stacey, with a fat green bulb at the top. Stacey picked up one of the stalks and began cracking it like a bull whip as he stomped along. He imagined lashing his classmates with it.

'Stacey is *not* a girl's name!' he shouted. *Crack!* 'You'll be sorry when I'm famous and powerful!' he yelled. *Crack!* 'Just you wait!' he hollered. 'One day I'll . . .'

Crack, squelch, splat!

The green bulb at the end of the sea-whip burst and out came a splurt of dirty water, and something else; something that *moved*, scabbling and burrowing its way down into the tangles of dead weed that were heaped along the tideline.



Stacey went closer and prodded the weed-piles with his toe. Something was definitely rustling around in there. He bent down for a closer look. Suddenly the weed was torn aside and a hideous little fanged and grinning face stared up at him. Then two little web-fingered hands seized the toe of his sneaker and the creature sank its teeth into the rubber.

'Yow!' shouted Stacey de Lacey, doing a triple backwards somersault in his surprise. The creature flew off his shoe. By the time he had clambered up and dusted the sand out of his eyes it was crouching on a nearby rock, watching him. It looked like an ugly little monkey with webbed hands and feet and greasy green fur.

'Get lost!' he yelled angrily.

The sea monkey cowered, and crept away over the top of the rock, out of sight.

Stacey was impressed. He wasn't used to people doing what he told them.

'Come back!' he shouted.

The monkey reappeared.

'My name is Stacey de Lacey,' he said, and watched the monkey suspiciously. It didn't laugh, it didn't even giggle.

'Stacey is not a girl's name!' he said. Still nothing. Feeling encouraged, he told it, 'You're mine! You will do everything I say!'

The monkey drew itself to attention, and saluted.

If Stacey de Lacey had been a different sort of boy he might have thought, 'I've found a friend!' But Stacey had never really wanted friends: he thought, 'I've found a servant!'



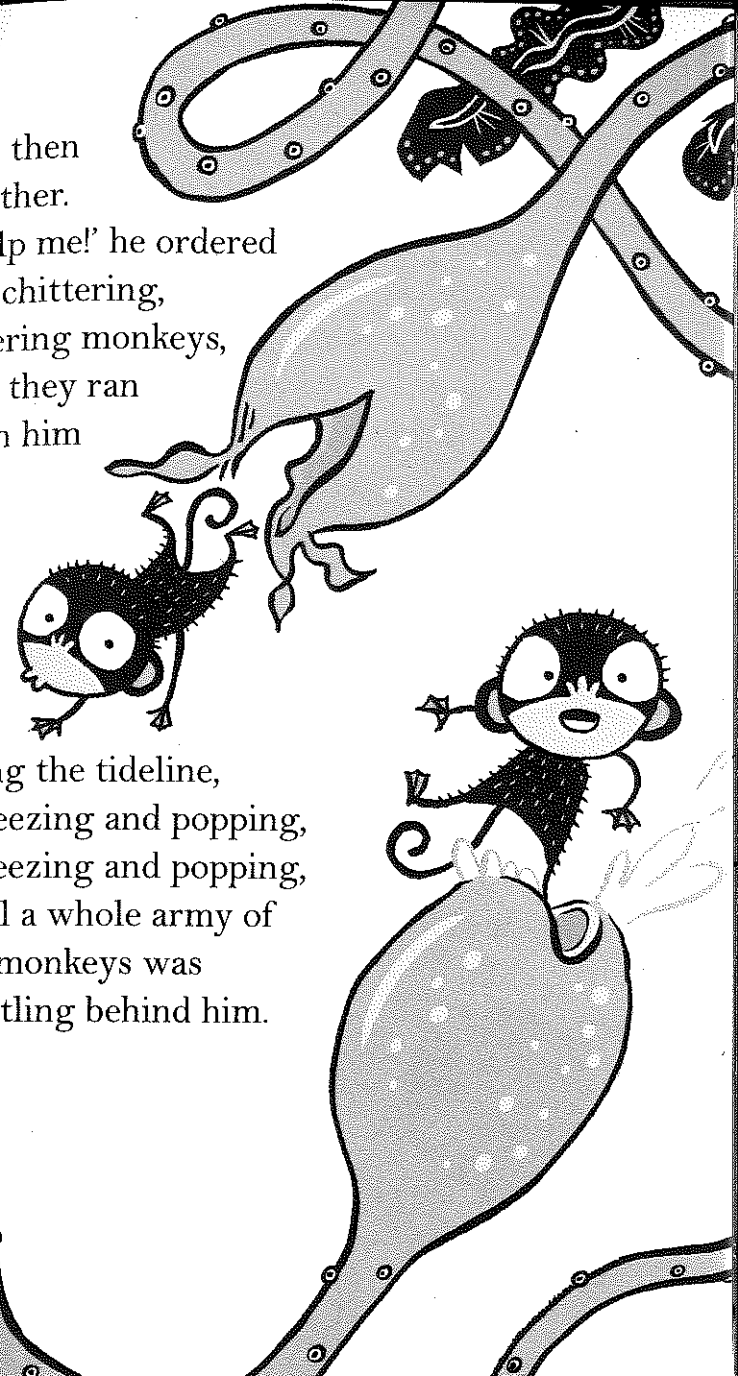
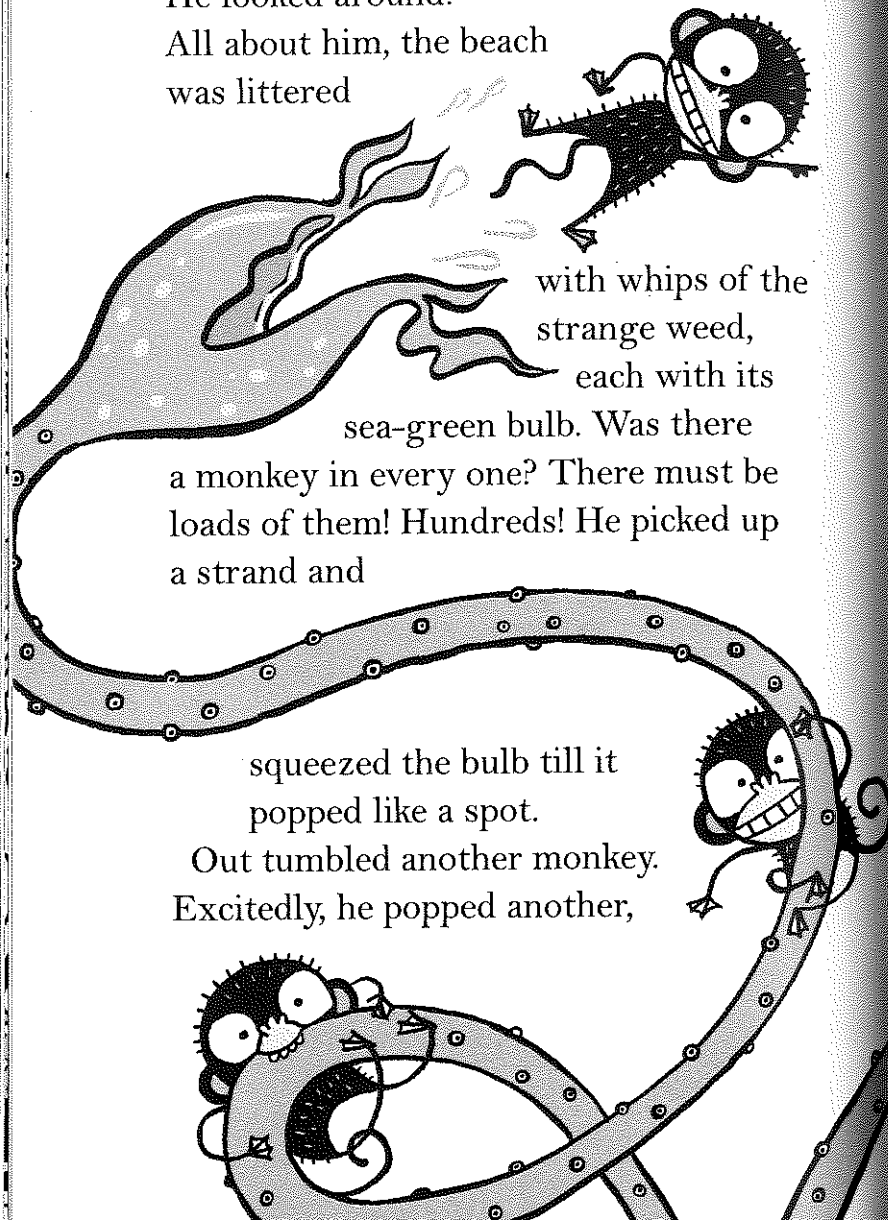
He looked around.
All about him, the beach
was littered

with whips of the
strange weed,
each with its
sea-green bulb. Was there
a monkey in every one? There must be
loads of them! Hundreds! He picked up
a strand and

squeezed the bulb till it
popped like a spot.
Out tumbled another monkey.
Excitedly, he popped another,

and then
another.
'Help me!' he ordered
the chittering,
jittering monkeys,
and they ran
with him

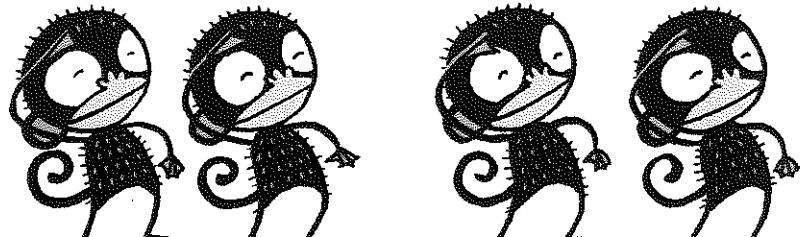
along the tideline,
squeezing and popping,
squeezing and popping,
until a whole army of
sea monkeys was
scuttling behind him.



Stacey de Lacey knew that his parents would never let him keep anything as stinky and repulsive-looking as these monkeys. Luckily, there was a particularly large and slimy rock pool that he knew of, around the curve of the cliffs, where nobody but he ever went. He led the monkeys there and watched them pour into the pool. They were as happy under water as above it. They crouched in the shadows of the pool and looked up at Stacey with wicked, wary eyes.

'I am your master!' he said proudly.

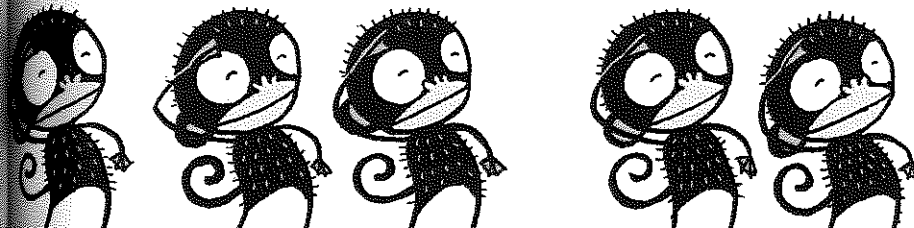
After that, Stacey de Lacey turned his thoughts to the sea. If sea monkeys were real, then what other strange things might the oceans hold? Between trips to the rock pool, where he fed and gloated over his growing monkey-band,



he talked to sailors at the harbour. He peered at old books in secret libraries. He learned of the Hallowed Shallows. He learned of mermaids, and drowned cities. He learned of the Rambling Isles, and of the gathering that they held on the Night of the Seawigs.

'Monkeys are all very well,' said Stacey de Lacey to himself, 'but if I had my own Rambling Isle, think how powerful I'd be then!' He liked the idea of roving the world on his own island, being mean to people.

So he started scouring the beach for interesting things the sea washed up, and leaving them above the tideline on a tall rock just off-shore. If the Night of the Seawigs was real, he thought, no Rambling Isle would be able to resist such top-notch wig ingredients. And sure enough, one foggy evening, he



heard great sloshing footsteps move through the waves towards that rock, and saw a giant shape moving in the mist. He heard the Rambling Isle grumbling to itself as it sifted through the pile of driftwood and old fishing nets he'd left. 'This stuff's no good,' he heard it say. 'This won't help me win . . .'

'Hey, Island!' shouted Stacey de Lacey. The grumbling stopped. The thing in the fog stood listening. 'You want to win this stupid Seawigs thing?' yelled Stacey. 'You should steal the best stuff from other islands' wigs. And if you can't do that, just nobble them: ruin their wigs so they can't win!'

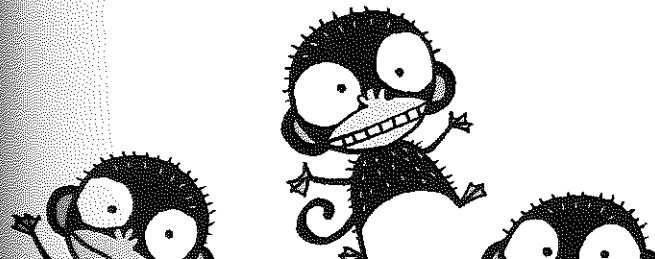
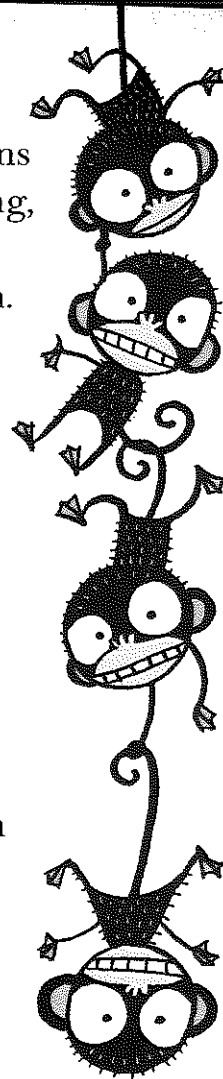
As luck would have it, the island Stacey was talking to was none other than the bad old Thurlstone, meanest of all the Rambling Isles. The Thurlstone liked the way this boy thought. 'How?' it asked.

'With my help!' said Stacey, and as the Thurlstone loomed out of the fog to

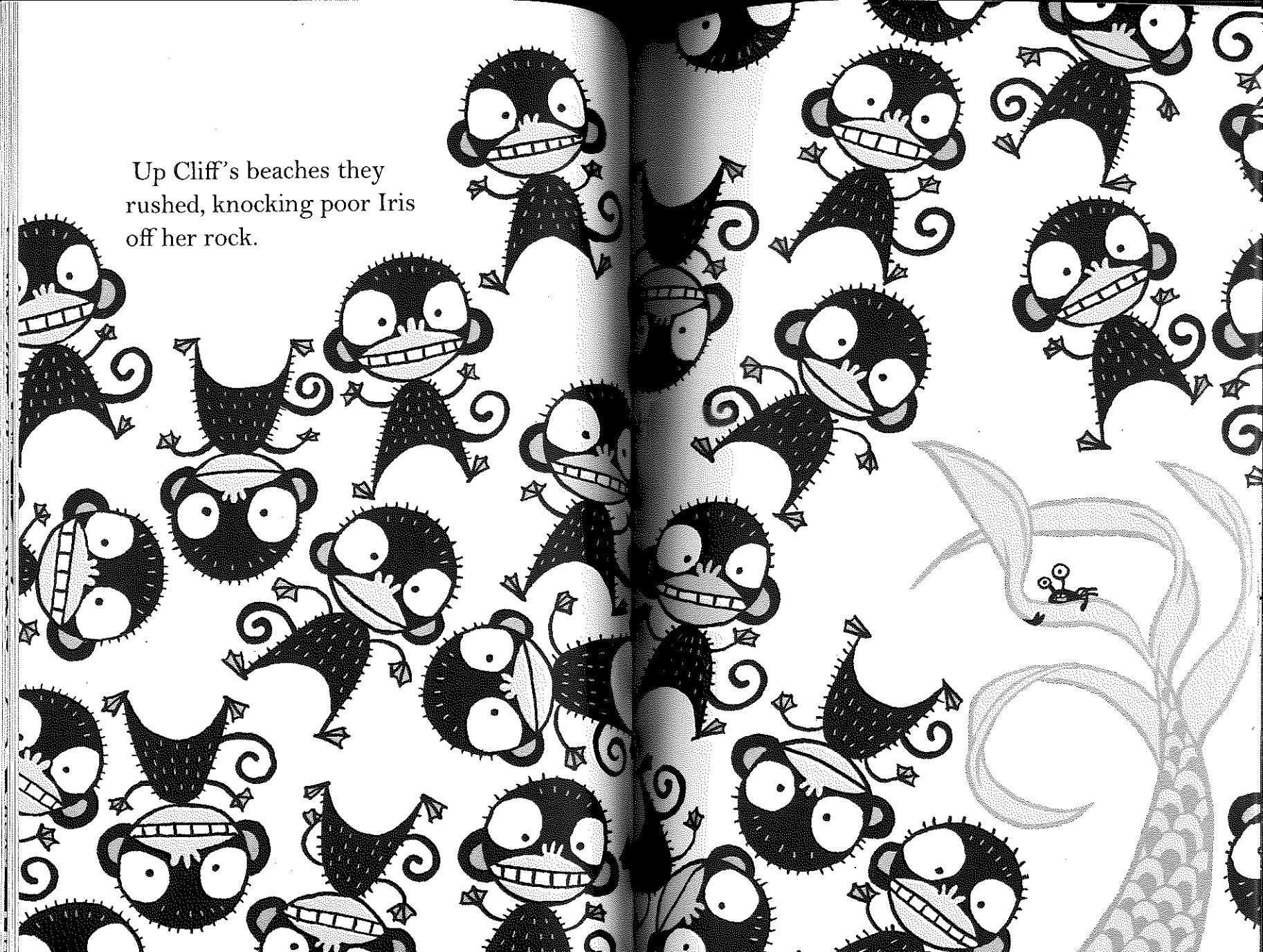
peer down at him he spread his arms out proudly to show it the gibbering, jabbering swarm of monkeys crowded on the shingle behind him.

'I have an army of monkeys!' he said.

That's what the green tide was, pouring out of the mouths and eyes of the Thurlstone's old stone heads and rushing across the sea. Sea monkeys! Small and smelly in their coats of greasy green fur, they giggled horribly as they swam towards Cliff, or scampered across the mats of drifting weed. 'Don't mind us,' grumbled the weed-mats, but the sea monkeys were immune to sarcasm.



Up Cliff's beaches they
rushed, knocking poor Iris
off her rock.



They sank their teeth and claws into the orange inflatable and popped it, just for laughs. Oliver tried to stop them. He picked up monkeys and hurled them back at the sea, but more were landing all the time and they were scary and dangerous-looking. They bared their dirty yellow fangs and screeched at him.

The monkey tide sloshed up onto Cliff's bouldery summit and lapped around the *Water Mole*. The sea monkeys were so small that Oliver did not think they could shift the submarine, but there were so many of them that they did. The *Water Mole* lifted from its perch, afloat again on a sea of snot-green fur. Oliver and Iris had to jump out of the way as the chattering monkeys rushed back with it into the sea. The Thurlstone dipped down, till only Stacey's balcony and the old stones and the trees around the temple showed, and the monkeys swam and swirled and

struggled and shoved the *Water Mole* onto his head.

'So long, losers!' called Stacey de Lacey, waving. 'We'll see you at the Hallowed Shallows—if you still think it's worth turning up, of course.'

The Thurlstone turned and moved off. The glass orbs which were Oliver's parents' prisons bobbed on either side of it, towed on their tethers of rope, with Mr and Mrs Crisp waving sad goodbyes inside them. Sea monkeys went scurrying back to their nests in the old stone heads. The *Water Mole* shone so brightly in the slanting sunlight that Oliver could see the gleam of it long after the wicked island had dwindled to a speck on the horizon.

That went well!

said the watching weed.

