

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!'

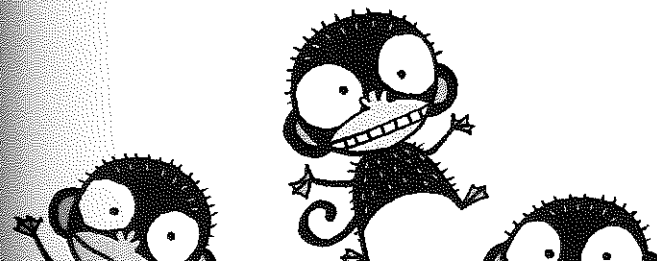
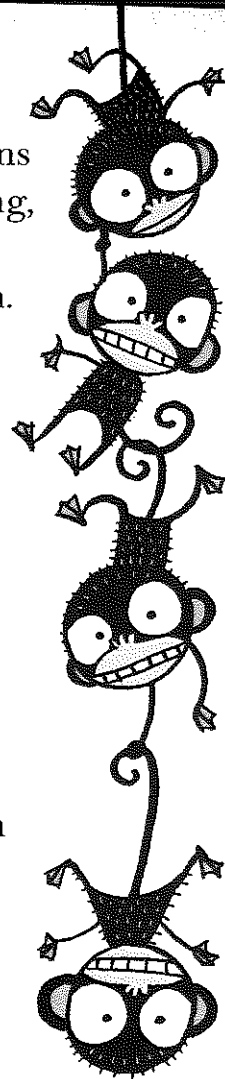
As luck would have it, the island Stacey was talking to was none other than the bad old Thurlstone, meanest of all the Rambling Isles. The Thurlstone liked the way this boy thought. 'How?' it asked.

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

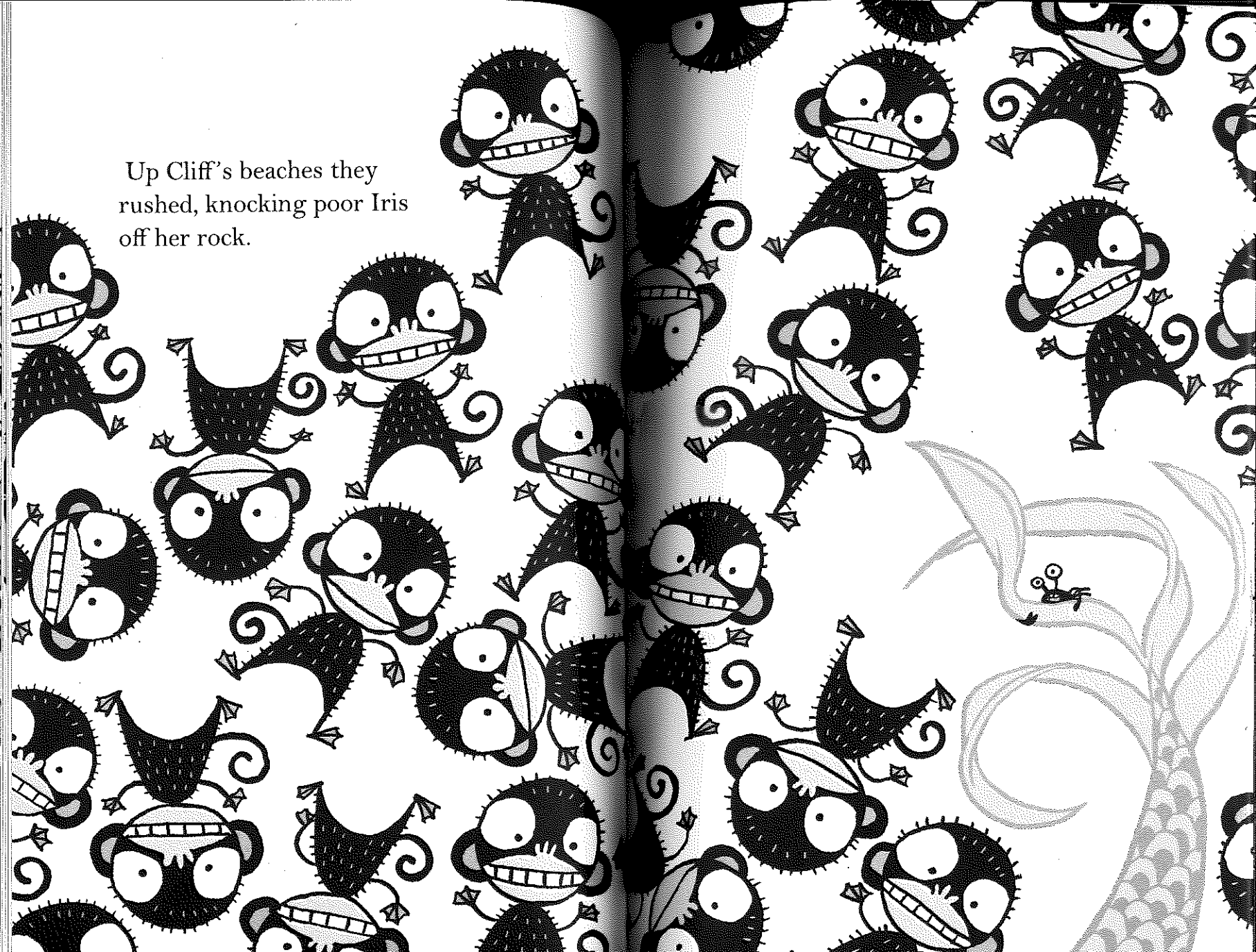
peer down at him he spread his arms out proudly to show it the gibbering, jabbering swarm of monkeys crowded on the shingle behind him.

'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

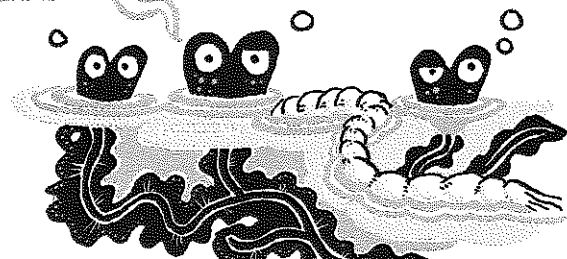
struggled and shoved the *Water Mole* onto his head.

'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!

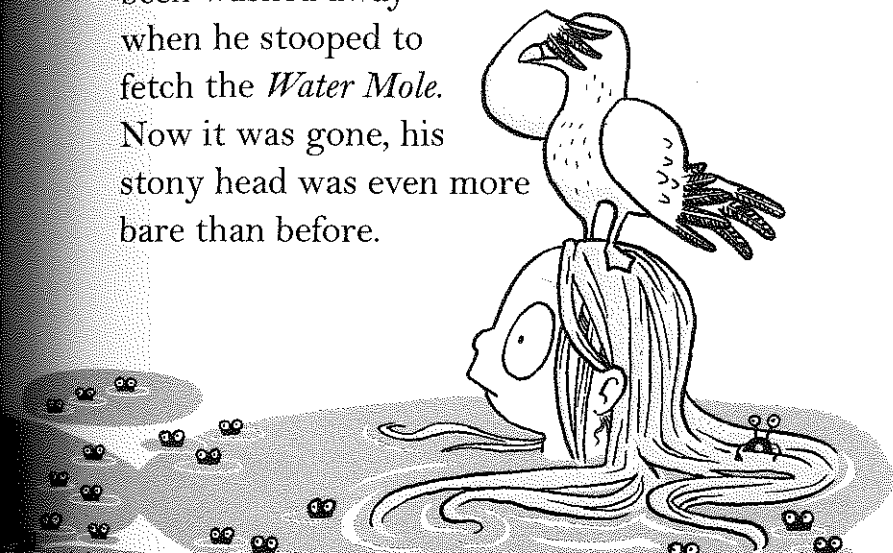
said the
watching weed.





SIX

As the Thurlstone vanished, all Cliff's new-found hopefulness drained away. The fight went out of him. Iris and Oliver felt him slump. They couldn't blame him. Poor old giant! So much of his golden sand and drifts of flotsam had been washed away when he stooped to fetch the *Water Mole*. Now it was gone, his stony head was even more bare than before.



'Now what shall we do?' asked Iris.

'Go after that Thurlstone, of course!' shouted Oliver. 'Quick, Cliff! Follow him!'

Cliff lifted his cave mouth out of the waves to say, 'What's the point? He's beaten me.' Then he subsided again.

'You can't just let him win!' said Oliver. 'Is he the sort of island who deserves to win the Night of the Seawigs? And as for that Stacey de Lacey . . . ! Go after them, and get the *Water Mole* back!'

'How?' rumbled Cliff. 'They have an army of monkeys.'

'He's got a point,' said Iris.

'Then go to the Hallowed Shallows!' insisted Oliver. 'Tell everyone what Stacey and his Thurlstone did . . . '

'They won't listen to me,' said Cliff wearily. 'They'll be too busy admiring the Thurlstone's marvellous seawig, and laughing at me.'

'So what are you going to do?' Iris asked.

Cliff sighed. 'I'm going to settle,' he decided.

'No!' yelled Oliver.

'I should have done it years ago,' Cliff went on. 'What's the point of all this tramping around, collecting stuff? I'm going to stand here and grow roots and forget I ever was a Rambler. I'll become just an island. That's all I'm good for. I'm useless. Finished. Washed up.'

He sank back slowly into the sea.

'No!' shouted Oliver again. He did a dance of frustration, shin-deep in the wavelets which washed Cliff's shores. But no amount of stamping or shouting would make Cliff come up again. Oliver remembered the sad, lifeless, settled isles which Iris had shown him on the way to the Sarcastic Sea. He imagined the sand and silt slowly piling up around Cliff's feet.

'Oh dear,' said Iris, with salt tears dripping off her chin. 'I think he means it.'

'Now look what you've done,' sniffed Mr Culpeper, fussily rearranging his nest, which had been terribly knocked about by those swarming sea monkeys. 'If you hadn't dragged us here in search of that stupid wreck this would never have happened. It's all your fault.'

'Well I'm not going to let Stacey de Lacey win,' said Oliver. Years of exploring had taught him that you don't solve problems by sitting around complaining about them. You have to *do* something. That's how his mum and dad had saved him from that Komodo dragon. That's how they'd escaped from the dungeons of M'bumbi M'bumbi. He struck an explorer-ish pose on the shore and said, 'I'm going to go after that Thurlstone and show it that it can't just go around snitching other people's shipwrecks and kidnapping mums and dads!'

'That's all very well and good,' said

Iris, 'but ARMY OF MONKEYS, remember? Oh, and your boat's gone all flop.'

Oliver ignored the reminder about the monkeys.

He hadn't yet thought of any way that he could deal with them. He had an answer to the part about the boat, though. He opened his explorer's pack and triumphantly pulled out a foot pump and a Punctured Dinghy Repair Kit. One hour of patching and pumping later, he was ready. He shoved the dinghy into the waves and hoisted himself aboard. He tugged the motor's starter cord.

It didn't work. It never did. You needed big muscly arms like Dad's to make it start.



Iris looked on doubtfully. 'I suppose I could help,' she said.

'Oh yes, you'll be a lot of use!' snapped Oliver, so sarcastically that even the seaweed was shocked. 'Your arms are even feebler than mine!'

'Oh, I don't mean like that,' sniffed the mermaid. She unhooked the motor from the stern of the dinghy and dropped it on the shore. Then, before Oliver could ask how that was supposed to help, she scrambled half aboard the dinghy, with her tail hanging off behind.

'Shove off!' she said.

'Ooh, isn't she *rude*!' whispered the weed, admiringly.

'I mean shove the *dinghy* off.'

Oliver shoved. As the dinghy drifted into deeper water Iris started to flap her tail up and down, driving them away from the shore.

It was difficult to steer at first, but they soon worked it out. Iris took the dinghy

on a farewell circuit of the island. Oliver looked over the side, down through the waves at the great, dim cliff face of Cliff's face looming there. He couldn't see if Cliff's eyes were open or closed. He couldn't tell if the Rambling Isle was watching his friends leave, or just too sad to care. He waved anyway.

Mr Culpeper flapped over to perch on the dinghy's prow. 'I might as well come with you,' he said. 'After all, you'll need help finding that thieving island, I suppose.'

So the albatross took off again, soaring towards the horizon, and the mermaid-powered dinghy followed him, splashing along the lane of open water which the Thurlstone had left through the sarcastic weed.



It was tiring work for poor Iris. Every few minutes she had to stop and rest while Oliver refuelled her by feeding her caramel bars from his lunch box. But at last the Sarcastic Sea was left behind.

'I wonder why Stacey de Lacey is so keen to help the Thurlstone win the contest, anyway?' wondered Oliver. But Iris was too busy being an outboard motor to reply.

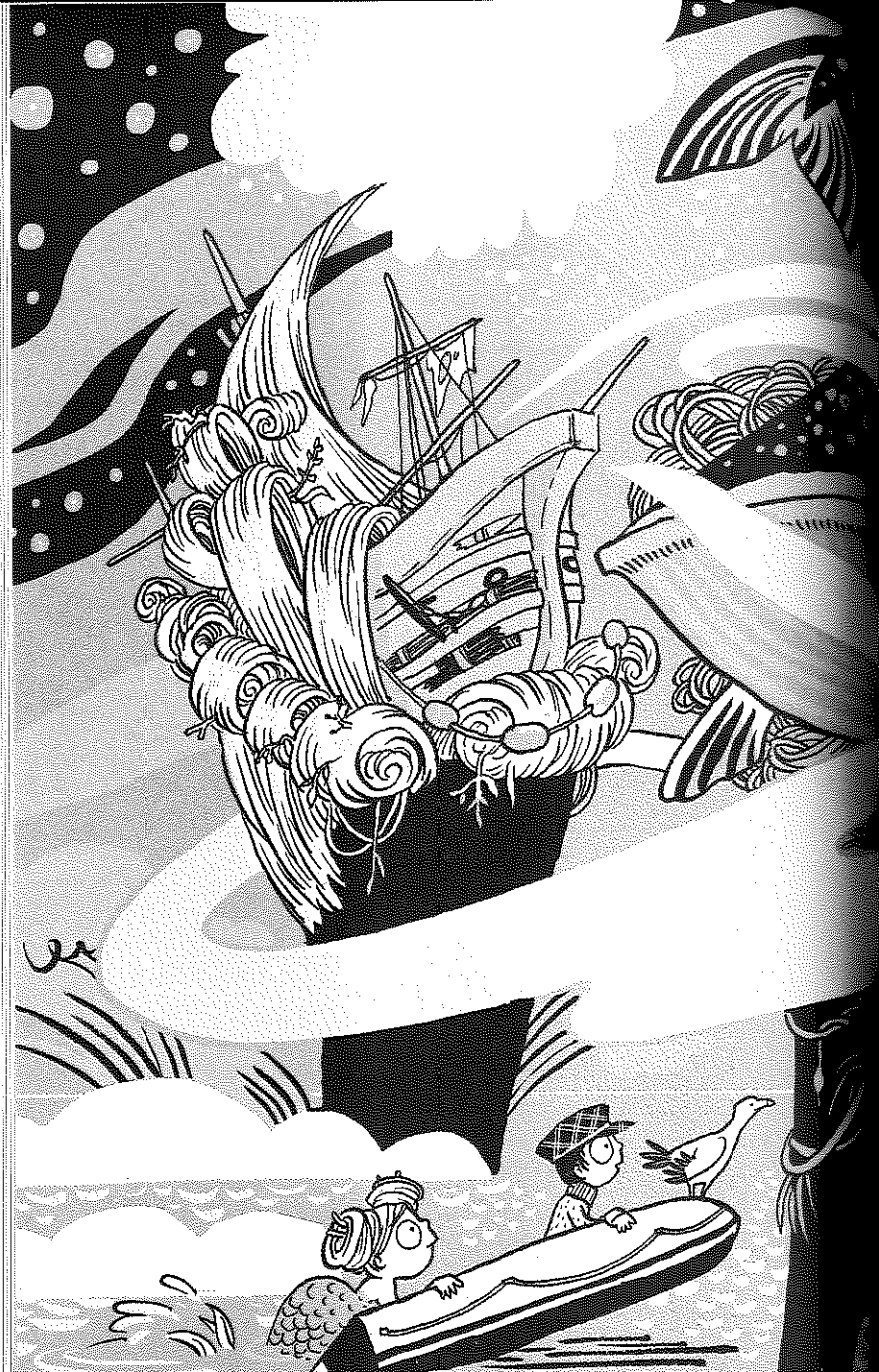
Mr Culpeper flew above them, calling down directions. At first there was no need, for Oliver and Iris could see the Thurlstone, far ahead. But as the day wore on the thieving isle drew away from them, and a strange haze arose. Soon it was hard for even the sharp-eyed albatross to see very far. 'We are coming near to the Hallowed Shallows,' said Iris.

They began to pass other Rambling Isles. At first they looked like normal

islands, but they were all moving, and all in the same direction, with white wakes of foam stretching behind them. Some were as small and tatty as Cliff. Some were magnificent. There was one who had sculpted a sort of volcano on his upper parts, and lit a fire in it so trails of smoke rings mingled with the haze. There was one who had drizzled wet sand onto her head to build up teetering pinnacles and spires, and another who had arranged miles and miles of weed into a massive beehive, with a small ship stuck in the middle of it. None of them paid the slightest attention to the dinghy.

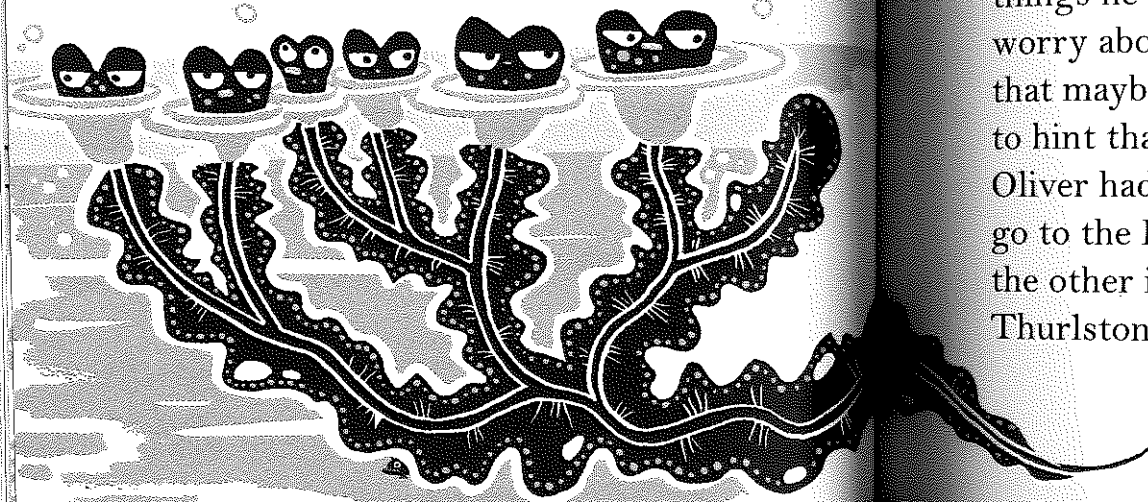
'If only Cliff was here!' said Oliver, feeling sad that they had left their own Rambling Isle behind.

'The rest would only laugh at him,' said Iris. 'Some of those seawigs are to die for!'



Meanwhile, back in the Sarcastic Sea, Cliff was thinking sadly of his friends. He had never had actual *people* living on him before, and he missed them now that they were gone. Not only that, the seaweed had drifted closer now that he was not moving, and it kept jeering and sniggering at him and saying how *brave* it thought he was.

'No,' he told himself. 'It's no use worrying. I've had enough. All these years wandering and gathering things, just so some other isle can pinch them. That's it. I'm settling here. Maybe one day someone will put another "Danger:



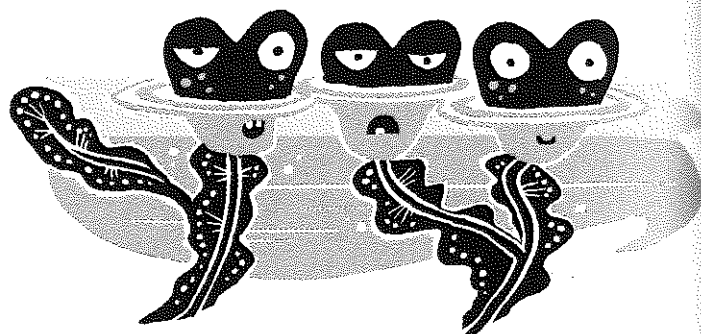
Submerged Rocks" sign on me.' And he shut his eyes and sank his toes down deep into the sea-floor silt and tried to stand as still and lifeless as any other rock of the ocean.

But he could not stop his mind from working. He could not stop himself thinking.

He thought how wrong it was that the Thurlstone was allowed to roam around wrecking other people's wigs. Then he thought sadly that the *Water Mole* was the best thing he had ever, ever found. Then he thought that, actually, Oliver and Iris were the best things he had found. He began to worry about them. He began to think that maybe the jeering weed was right to hint that he'd been cowardly. Maybe Oliver had been right. Maybe he *should* go to the Hallowed Shallows and tell the other isles what that rotten-hearted Thurlstone was up to.

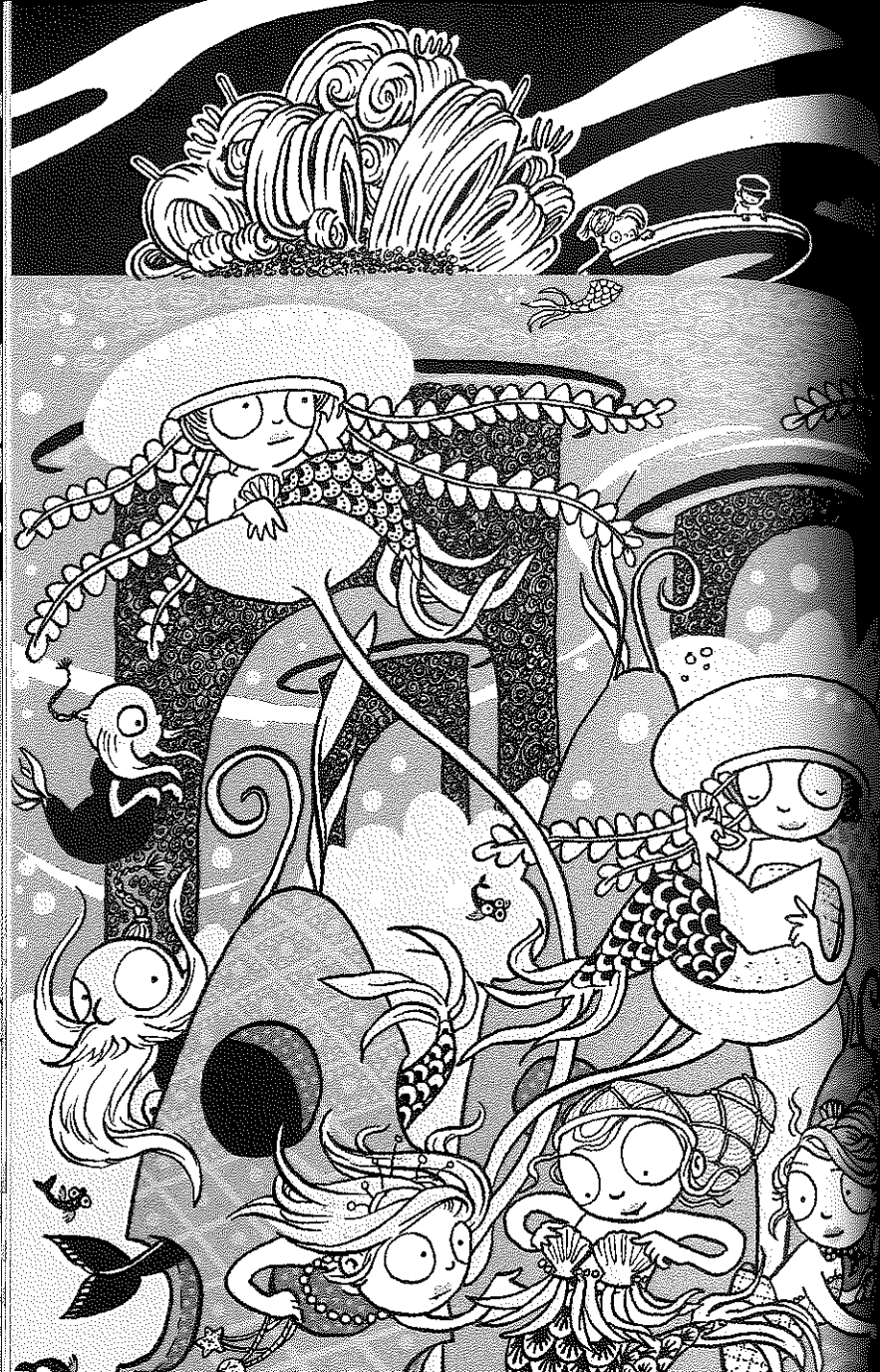
'Somebody's got to do *something!*' he said aloud. 'And Oliver and Iris are too small, and Mr Culpeper is just an albatross, so that somebody must be . . . er . . . *me!*'

Ooooooh!



said all the seaweed, tittering in that annoying way it had. But it soon stopped, for Cliff was on the move again, striding and swimming as quickly as he could towards the same horizon that Oliver's dinghy had vanished over.





SEVEN

The sea beneath the dinghy was growing shallower. First the faces of the wading islands appeared above the waves, and then their shoulders. Oliver looked down through the clear water and saw mermaid villages clustering on the silvery sand of the sea floor. The islands set their huge stony feet down carefully, picking their way between huts and fish farms.

Iris peered down too, trying to spot people she knew. Merfolk were darting in shoals between the islands' feet, but Iris was too short-sighted to make out their faces.

Ahead, some of the isles had stopped, a crowd of great stony heads rising from the water. Their voices boomed across the sea, exchanging greetings and stories of their travels.

'Look!' said Oliver.

In the midst of the waiting isles stood the Thurlstone. There was no mistaking that towering outline, with the stolen submarine right on the top. The islands around it were all casting wary, envious looks at its fine wig.

Iris flapped the dinghy closer. A fire was blazing among the trees on the Thurlstone's top. Now and then a small, cavorting figure was silhouetted against the flames. The sound of drumming echoed across the water. There was no

sign of those dangling glass globes.

Oliver felt awfully afraid. He remembered what Cliff had said about the Thurlstone's liking for blood. Was that why Stacey de Lacey had captured his parents? Perhaps he was hoping to impress the other Rambling Isles with human sacrifices!

'I have to go and find them!' he said.

The only answer was a snore from Iris. Tired out by all that tail-flapping, she had fallen asleep, draped over the dinghy's stern.



Oliver did not try to wake her. He could see that she was far too exhausted to help him free his parents. He pulled her into the dinghy and tucked a blanket from his rucksack over her. He looked around for Mr Culpeper, but the albatross had flown off to talk to some of the gulls which wheeled in white clouds around the other Rambling Isles.

Oliver scrawled a note to Iris on the inside of a caramel bar wrapper, then quickly stripped down to his special explorer's pants. He snapped on some goggles and a pair of frogman's flippers which he found in his rucksack, and dived into the sea. He struck out quickly towards the Thurlstone. Crowds of merpeople and shoals of silver fish darted beneath him, but they were all far too busy and excited to notice him. The Thurlstone's rocky head towered up into the darkening sky ahead of him. On its black sand beach only the surf

moved, but up on its top he could hear sea monkeys cheering and squealing, pounding on stone xylophones and sealskin drums.

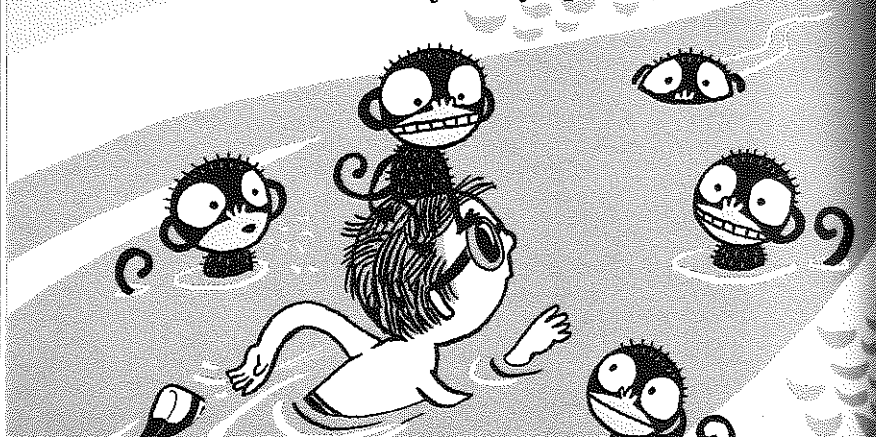
Oliver swam and swam. He was a good swimmer (he needed to be after all the shark and crocodile and piranha infested waters that Mr and Mrs Crisp had made him swim in) but the Thurlstone did not seem to be getting any nearer. He realized that it was moving again, shuffling its way right to the front of that crowd of giants.

A little cold finger of panic tickled Oliver on the back of his neck. He looked back. He had already swum a long way. He was shivering slightly, and although the Hallowed Shallows might only come up to the knees of Rambling Isles, Oliver was still far out of his depth. He thought for a moment of shouting for Iris, but he wasn't sure what might happen if the Rambling



Isles or the merpeople heard him, and realized that a human being had come to their sacred seas.

Just then he noticed that the little cold finger tickling him wasn't panic; it was an actual finger, and it belonged to an actual sea monkey. He yelped



with fright as the creature doggy-paddled round in front of him, grinning madly. 'Eep!' it said, eyes blazing with reflected moonbeams. It grabbed Oliver by his wrist, and started pulling him with it through the water, towards the Thurlstone.

For a moment Oliver struggled, fearful of capture. Then he looked again at the monkey's grinning face and changed his mind. It was trying to help him.

'Eep!' it said again, and with an answering 'Eep!' another monkey appeared, sliding over a wave top and seizing Oliver by his other wrist. They chattered at each other, kicking their

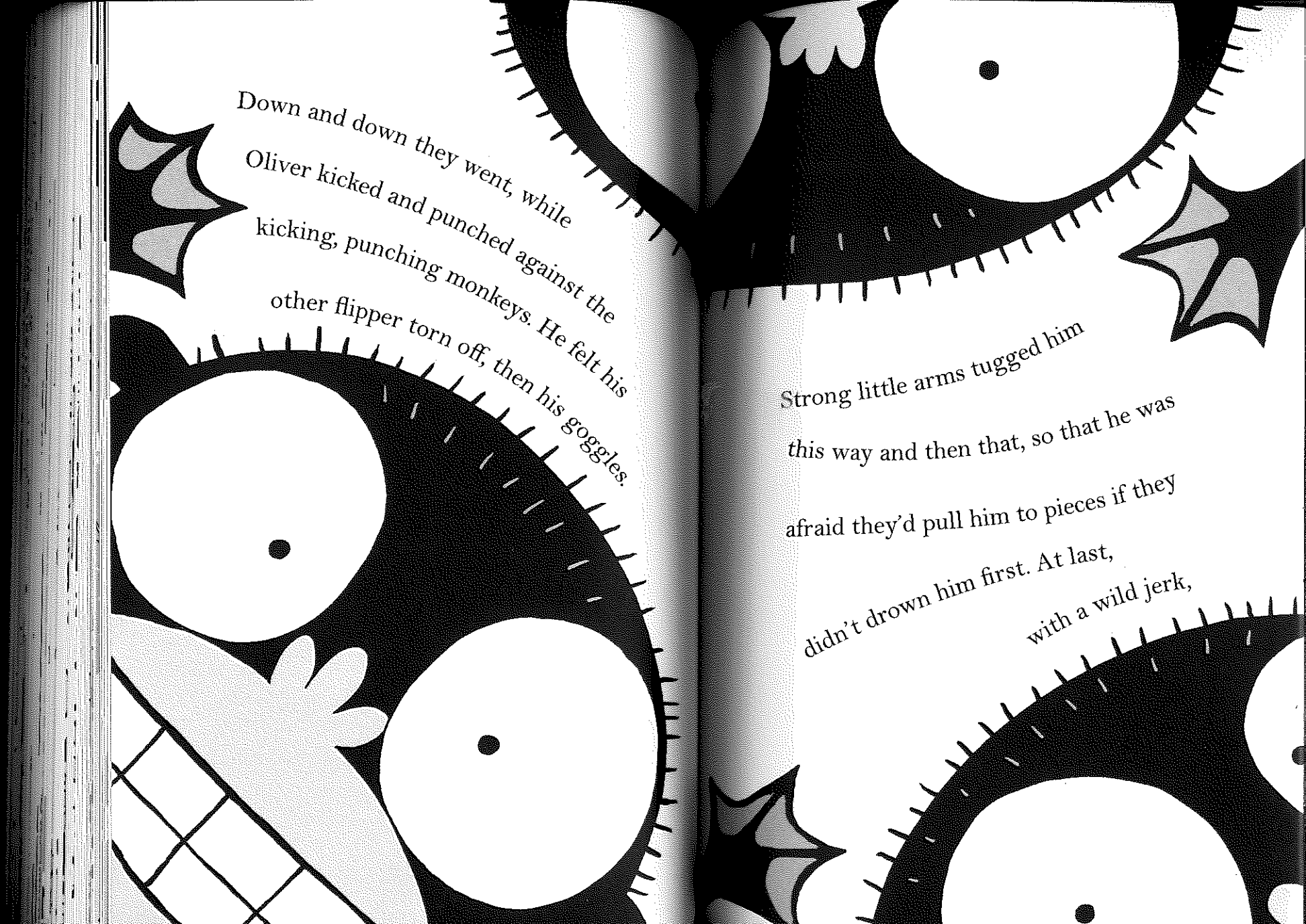
powerful little legs, hauling him forwards through the water. In ones and twos they seemed quite cute, he thought. Perhaps they weren't such bad creatures after all. Perhaps they just wanted to play?

A third monkey appeared. Then a fourth. The Thurlstone was definitely drawing nearer now. That rowdy party was still going on up above, but from nooks and crevices in the island's shores more monkeys were jumping down into the surf and swimming out to see what their friends had found. Their small hands stroked and prodded Oliver. They added their strength to his and he surged through the waves, closer and closer to the Thurlstone's beach . . .

And then, all of a sudden, there were too many monkeys. They all wanted to play with Oliver, and the newcomers began to squabble with the ones who'd found him first. Some climbed onto Oliver's head. Some wrestled his

right flipper off and clung gleefully to his toes as he kicked and twisted, trying to dislodge them. He started to feel as if he was swimming in wet green fur instead of water. Monkeys were using him as a raft, scrambling up onto his shoulders and crowding on his head, forcing him under. A scrabbling, squabbling ball of monkeys surrounded him as he sank, and they were so busy taunting and fighting and teasing each other that none of them stopped to wonder if the boy in their midst could breathe under water.





Down and down they went, while
Oliver kicked and punched against the
kicking, punching monkeys. He felt his
other flipper torn off, then his goggles.

Strong little arms tugged him
this way and then that, so that he was
afraid they'd pull him to pieces if they
didn't drown him first. At last,
with a wild jerk,

he jackknifed free of them and struck out blindly, leaving the monkeys to swirl and tumble behind him, not realizing yet that he'd broken out.

The Thurlstone's flank was a dim, dark wall in front of him. A deeper darkness showed in it. Oliver swam in, thinking it was a cleft that might hide him from the monkeys as he clawed his way back to the surface. In fact it was the opening of a narrow cave. Oliver remembered all those cracks and fissures he had noticed in the Thurlstone's sides when it first rose from the waves. Hollow; rotten to the core. That's what Cliff had said . . .

The passage was too narrow to turn round in, so he swam on. Heart pounding, eyes bulging, sure he was about to drown, he clawed through winding, stony passages, until at last he came up gasping for air at the centre of a flooded cavern.

Through a shaft in the ceiling moonlight

slanted, shining on the rippled water. Drums and monkey chants came down too, but softly, as if from high above. Things brushed against Oliver's legs as he trod water in the middle of the cave. Weeds? Or tentacles? He thought of the squids and octopuses that had clung to the Thurlstone's eyebrows. Was this where they lived? Panicking a bit, he swam to the side of the cave and pulled himself out onto a stony ledge. Behind him the water slopped and gurgled. He imagined disappointed monsters sinking back into the depths.

An opening in the rock wall led into another passage. This one was dry, and moonlight came down it. He crept along it. It sloped steeply upwards, round, like a stone throat. Weeds and ferns grew from the walls, and he used them as handholds while he climbed.



EIGHT

Iris woke up suddenly. 'Oliver?' she said, sitting up in the dinghy and looking around. Night had fallen while she slept. Moonlight and starlight silvered the sea. The dinghy rose and fell upon a gentle swell.

