

Helping you choose books for children



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Opening extract from
**Something Wickedly
Weird: The Darkling
Curse**

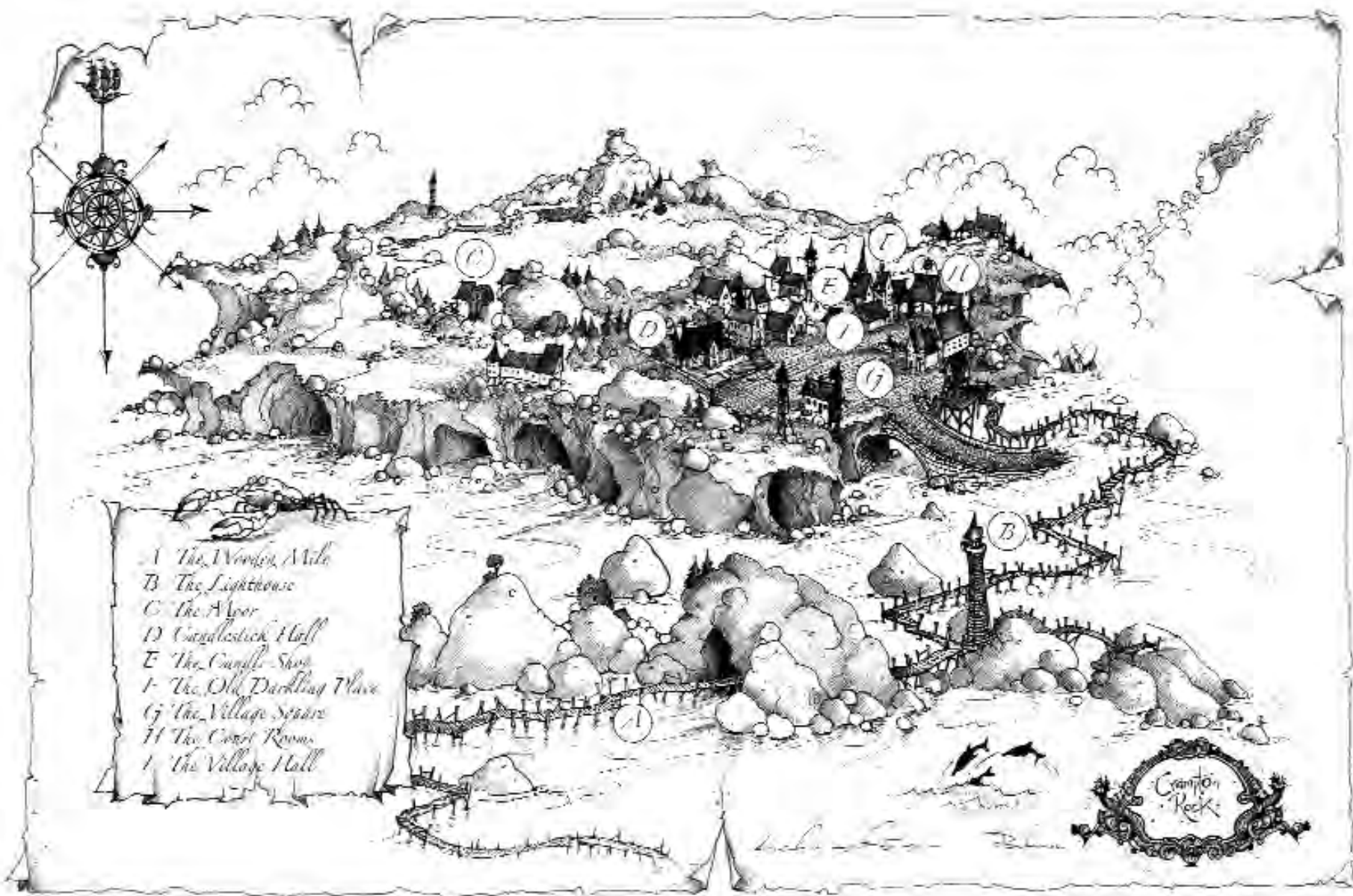
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- A The Wooden Mile
- B The Lighthouse
- C The Moor
- D Cragstick Hall
- E The Cragstick Shop
- F The Old Docking Place
- G The Village Square
- H The Coast Rooms
- I The Village Hall

Crampton
Reek



Stanley Buggles was standing in the drawing room of Candlestick Hall, looking over the portrait of his great-uncle, Admiral Swift. He wished he could tell him all that had happened since he'd inherited the old place from him. That he had finally got his hands on the ancient silver casket, and that it contained the six candles the Admiral himself had searched for.

And that right now a pan was warming them in the kitchen, melting them down to retrieve what lay hidden inside.

Outside the Hall, the wind had picked up. The grass blew in circles around the lawn, the sun shone through the windows and the breeze sent the flower tops dancing here and there.

Crack, crack, came an unfamiliar noise that drew Stanley to the window. A carrion crow was standing on the ledge, pecking at the glass.



Stanley went right up to it but it wasn't afraid. It was going berserk, flapping and beating its dark cloak and staring right at him. *Crack, crack,* it continued.

'Shoo, shoo,' said Stanley. 'Go on!' He banged back at it on the pane until it took off. This was not like Stanley – he was a great bird lover, and normally he would have stared at it all day, being so close, but it had spooked him.

'Do you have a minute, lad?' came Victor's voice, distracting him from his thoughts.

Victor had settled in well since his return to the island a few weeks before. Both he and Mrs Carelli, his wife, made good housekeepers. He did the gardens and repair work. She did the cooking and cleaning. Stanley did ... well, not much, but then again the place did belong to him. He wasn't lazy, he was just busy doing nothing, he would joke – and

then he would be off on some adventure through the house.

Things had changed for Stanley recently: he was going to make a permanent home on Crampton Rock. He had decided, along with his mother, that he would live there under the supervision of Mr and Mrs Carelli. And yes, his mother would visit from time to time, but mostly he would be out here on the Rock alone – and so far, he was loving every minute.

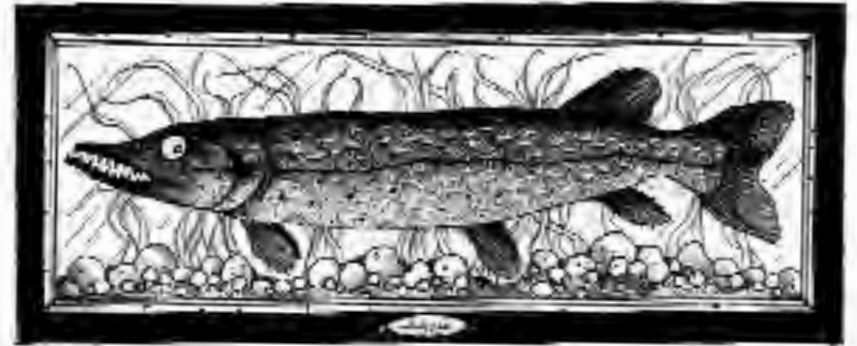
'How about that, lad? Is that how you wanted it?' asked Victor. He was pointing to the pike on the wall. He was in a spanking new, freshly polished glass case – just like his old one, but better. And he was back in his favourite spot under the back of the staircase.

'Excellent,' said Stanley. 'Thank you, Victor. He will be delighted, I'm sure.'

And as they walked away the pike was

already mumbling away to himself.

'About time too,' he grumbled. 'I couldn't have stayed in that old cupboard a moment longer. I have had quite enough by way of wild adventures and being hurled around from one place to another. I should be quite happy to remain here for now, thank you very much.'



Finally, the pike settled into a long sleep. But as he slept, something disturbed him.

He dreamed that a black cloud settled over the house, and that darkness was about to descend in some strange form.

Victor had turned to outside duties and Stanley was alone in the kitchen. He stood over the stove and waited impatiently for the wax to turn to a clear liquid. And as it did, six pieces of parchment became clear. Each was curled up from its long sleep, hidden inside the candles.

Stanley picked them out of the pan and turned them out on to the table. When all of them had cooled down, he fiddled around with the paper, flattening the pieces and fitting together the jigsaw.

Once he had put the pieces together, he could see that they held a complex set of instructions. But there was a large hole in the

middle of the puzzle! It was almost as if a diagram had been scissored out of the centre, with scribbled indications around it pointing this way and that. Why was the map not complete? It made no sense.

Just as Stanley was mulling over this dilemma, Victor returned.

'I'm sorry to bother you again, lad, but you must come outside and take a look at this.'

'At what?' asked Stanley. But Victor was already out of the door.

Stanley gathered the pieces of his map and bundled them carefully into a drawer on his way through the hallway. He would place them in his room shortly. The door was open and Stanley walked outside to find Victor standing on the long pathway and staring upwards.

What looked like a thousand crows had descended on to the roof of Candlestick Hall,

squawking and flapping and making a terrible din. There were so many they seemed to darken the sky.

Stanley had often seen the birds resting on a building in the village,

but for now they had claimed the lid of his house as their own.



What had brought them here?

Victor and Stanley were joined by Mrs Carelli, returning from the village. She was armed with bags of this and that, and stood craning her neck up at the black veil that covered the tiles.

'What on earth is that all about?' she called.

'Perhaps it *means* something,' said Stanley.

He knew enough about carrion crows not to trust them. Dressed like funeral guests in their dark hoods and sooty black coats, they were the craftiest of egg thieves and would think nothing of preying on young chicks.

Before Stanley and Victor could turn inside, one of the crows abruptly swooped down and took a fierce peck at Stanley. It clawed at him and its feet got stuck in his long hair.

Mrs Carelli batted it off. 'Shoo, shoo!' Victor swung his rake in the air as the bird persisted in attacking Stanley. The three of them fumbled towards the doorway, but the bird hung on still. In panic, Stanley closed his hands around its body and hurled it back into the air as they ran inside.

Safe indoors, dishevelled and shaken, they turned to each other and laughed. Pulling themselves back together, they looked out

through the window that took in the view of the harbour. Some crows had landed on the front lawn and one was at the window again, pecking.

Stanley's face grew serious. He watched for a while, until the birds returned to the roof.

'I've never seen no such birds attacking anyone, Victor,' Mrs Carelli insisted, looking at him for an explanation.

Victor shrugged his shoulders. 'Must be something in the breeze.'

But Stanley had a feeling it was more than the weather that had changed the mood of these sinister creatures. He gathered the pieces of map and went upstairs where he pored over the details again, distracting himself from his thoughts of the baleful black birds.