

Chapter1

RUNNING AWAY

Jimmy Crikey was not a happy boy. His big blue eyes were so sad. None of the children at Hill Crest Junior School would play with Jimmy. They only ever made fun of him. He tried ever so hard to study during lessons but the other children's sly giggles and rude remarks always managed to make him feel uncomfortable. When the school bell rang for playtime and everyone dashed outside to continue their games of tug, tag, hopscotch or skip, there always remained one lonely figure in some quiet corner of the school yard. Jimmy had long since given up his attempts to join in their games. He just didn't seem to be able to fit in and it's not nice to always be laughed at.

Why did they laugh at Jimmy? Well! He was certainly quite different from the other children and he did have rather an odd appearance. His head was crowned with a bright red shock of unruly hair. Between his big blue eyes snuggled a small, snub nose. His ears were rather longer and more pointed than usual, but his feet ... they were simply ee-nor-mous! They certainly looked out of place on such a small boy. Whenever he met someone for the first time they would stop and stare and then say, 'Crikey! Just look at him.' That was how he came to be known as Jimmy Crikey. His real name was Jimmy McGellan but the boys and girls at Hill Crest school always called him Jimmy Crikey.

It started off that one boy began to bully Jimmy always making fun of his odd appearance. That boy persuaded one of his friends to join in the fun of taunting the odd one out and soon they were all ganging up on Jimmy. In team games no one would choose Jimmy to be on their side because he had a habit of stumbling over

his enormous feet. Whichever team Jimmy was on always lost whatever game they were playing. As a result no one chose Jimmy to be their friend. He was totally excluded from their gangs, just because he looked different. Despite their cruel jokes Jimmy was a very bright boy. He seemed to learn faster than anyone else, but he never raised his hand during class to answer a teacher's question, although he almost always knew the answer. He just wanted to stay quietly in the background without drawing any further attention to himself.

Only when school was over for the day did Jimmy begin to relax and smile. Then he dashed back to his home on the very edge of Esh village, where he lived with his very special Aunt Ethel. Lemonade and cake or milk and biscuits were always ready on the kitchen table when he rushed in from school to Aunt Ethel's warm welcome of a smile, a hug and a great big sloppy kiss.

Kindly Aunt Ethel Harper was a little overweight, slightly rotund, but in a cuddly, warm way. She almost always wore a gingham pinafore over her flowery dresses. Her hair was as white as snow and she had looked after Jimmy for as long as he could remember. Jimmy's parents had died when he was very young and Aunt Ethel promised them she would look after their baby until he was old enough to care for himself. Each night Aunt Ethel would tuck him up in bed and tell exciting, bedtime adventure stories. Some were about faraway places among the stars; others were about exploring strange worlds, and yet more were about sailing expeditions on distant seas. Then, after saying prayers, she would plant a kiss on his cheek and bid him, "Sleep tight!"

One night, after saying his prayers as usual, Jimmy finally made up his mind. He was tired of everyone making fun of his strange appearance. It seemed to him that he just could not make any friends. No one had time to spare for the boy who

was different. So, he wrote a note for Aunt Ethel and left it on his pillow. He had decided to run away.

"Please don't worry about me Aunt Ethel," he wrote. "I'm going off on a search to see if I can find a place where people will not laugh and make fun of me. Somehow I feel that I don't belong in this world. I just don't fit in. Thank you for caring for me. When I am settled I'll write to let you know where I am. Goodbye. Love from Jimmy."

He crept quietly down the stairs to the kitchen and packed into his satchel a few shortbread biscuits, two chocolate covered crisp bars and a bottle of lemonade,. Carefully and quietly he opened the kitchen door and walked out into the dark night. With a last look over his shoulder, he set off on his journey into the wide world.

He turned left after leaving the house and began walking away from the village. Initially hesitant, until his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the night, he walked down the country lane lit only by a silvery, full moon. And Jimmy began to wish he had waited until morning. He could hear the animals and owls making their night-time noises, calling to each other, the owl telling the fox, "Look out! Someone's about." By the time Jimmy reached the edge of the forest, the lane had diminished to a track and the moon was hiding behind a cloud. He stumbled along the narrow track between the trees, whistling a happy tune to try to keep the fear at bay.

The night time's noises grew louder, as if they were following him, so he walked a little faster. Then, like a pistol shot, there came the sharp sound of cracking wood and, without waiting to discover what it was, Jimmy ran. He didn't know that the sound had been created by an old, rotted branch snapping and falling from a tree. He just ran, and ran, and ran, bumping into tree trunks and tripping over long tree roots in his mad dash to escape. He was so blinded by fear that he didn't notice

the hole in the ground opening up in front of him and suddenly he was falling, down and down and down. He tumbled head over heels and bumped from side to side, down the shaft. His fall was slowed by the tangle of tree roots that grew across the vertical shaft, but he still received a painful bump when he landed on the dried leaves and twigs, which had collected at the bottom of the hole.

It should have been pitch black down there, but from one corner there came the faintest glow of light. Moving the twigs and dried leaves to one side, he looked out and rubbed his eyes in amazement. He couldn't believe what he could see. There, outside the hole, was a whole new world. Jimmy emerged into green fields swathed in wild flowers stretching away for miles. The gently sloping hills were carpeted with colours of every hue and, in the distance, there were mountains topped with glistening snow. The entry to this world was at the base of a towering cliffside. The tops of the cliffs were shrouded in mist where they met the sky. From the strangely luminous sky, a warm, shining glow of soft light bathed the whole scene.

Jimmy was astonished and, as he looked around, his wide eyes picked out traces of a faint pathway that only animals had trod. It led off into the distant green hills. He tossed his satchel over his shoulder and made up his mind to follow wherever the path led. Fear disappeared as Jimmy set off to explore this strange new world he had found at the bottom of a hole.

Chapter 2

UNDERGROUND WORLD

Jimmy followed the trampled grass track through the underground world for many hours. The path led through meadows, over surrounding hills, crossing many

streams. Black and yellow fuzzy-coated bees buzzed and colourful butterflies flitted among the flowers that were scattered in random patterns across the slopes.

After several hours of walking, tired, he stopped to rest awhile, and sat on a rock at the top of a hill. All that exercise had made Jimmy feel quite hungry and thirsty, so, while he rested he ate the biscuits and one of the cakes that were packed in his satchel. He finished his picnic snack with a long thirst-quenching drink of lemonade.

Feeling refreshed, Jimmy started to follow the track again, winding slowly down the hill into the valley. Then the path appeared to widen into a definite track and then a road, and the road was leading toward... well, toward what seemed to be a village or a town. Yes! There, in the distance, was - a small town. His pace quickened, down the path to the bottom of the hill, along the road toward the town. He hoped and wished that the children in this town would not laugh at his bright red shock of hair, his small snub nose, his pointed ears nor his ee-nor-mous feet.

Jimmy's footsteps clattered on the cobblestones when he walked between the houses into the town's central market square. No one laughed at him. No one laughed because there was no one there to laugh. Not a single person was to be seen, anywhere. The market square was deserted except for a well standing in the centre, with a low, red brick wall built around it with a small, green tiled canopy over the roller bar.

There was not a sound to be heard other than the sighing of the breeze.

Jimmy stretched up on his toes and peeped through the windows of the shops and houses that surrounded the square. There were certainly people there but they were all fast asleep. He said a quiet, "Hello!" to the butcher, who was slouched in a chair inside the shop doorway, but the butcher just went on sleeping, eyes closed

tight beneath his yellow straw hat. He said, "Hello!" again, louder this time, but the butcher still didn't hear him. At last Jimmy shouted at the top of his voice, "Hello! Can anyone hear me?"

Then, very faintly, there came a reply. "Help! Help!" It wasn't the butcher's voice, he hadn't moved, not even his moustache had twitched.

Jimmy could not tell where the voice had come from and he tried again. "Hello! Where are you?"

Again the faint voice answered. "I'm down here."

Jimmy could hardly believe it - the sound seemed to be coming from the well in the middle of the town square. He walked across to it, stood on tiptoe and peered over the low surrounding wall, down the dark green shaft. When his eyes became accustomed to the dimness he saw a strange sight. There, at the bottom of the well, was a little lady - sitting in a tiny boat.

"Well, don't just stand there looking at me," yelled the little lady. "Get me out of here."

"How can I do that?" Jimmy asked.

"Lower the bucket on the end of the rope," the little voice shouted back.

Jimmy tried to turn the handle that was attached to the well's wooden roller to lower the bucket into the well, but the handle was jammed solid. He leaned over the wall and shouted down, "I can't turn the handle. It's stuck."

"Well! Give it a kick then," bellowed the little lady. So Jimmy did just that. He kicked the handle as hard as he could. The shock of the kick freed the rusted roller. The bucket fell down the well, but the roller turned so fast that Jimmy couldn't catch hold of the spinning handle to slow it down. He heard the bucket bouncing madly, from side to side, against the walls of the well. Then there was a big bump, a loud

splash and a surprised shout. "Aghhhh!"

Worried, he shouted down, "Are you all right?"

After a brief pause there came the rather cross answer, "No! I'm not all right. The bucket hit me on the head and knocked me into the water. Now there's a bump on my head and I'm all wet through." There was a short silence and then, "Well! Aren't you going to wind me up?"

"Sorry! I'll wind you up now,"

He was quite out of breath by the time the little lady in the green garb popped her head over the side of the well. Jimmy helped her out of the bucket and they sat together on the brick wall that surrounded the well. The elf-like figure replaced her green hat, swung up her green hosed legs and emptied the water out of her brown, ankle high boots.

Jimmy looked at the bump on the little lady's head and said, "I'm sorry about that."

"Oh, that's all right," she responded, now smiling. "I'm just happy that you came along and pulled me out. I've been down there for what seems like a year or more, with no one to talk to except the fish and the frogs, and they don't say very much. Anyway, now that I'm free, how do you do, I'm Gemma. Who are you?"

"I'm Jimmy." It was only then that Jimmy realised that he had made a new friend. A friend who did not laugh or point at his red shock of hair, his small snub nose, or his pointed ears, and Gemma didn't even seem to notice his enormous feet. The very first person he had met in this new subterranean world, Gemma, was actually thanking him for pulling him out of the well.

But then Gemma herself was more than a little unusual. The top of her head hardly reached as high as Jimmy's shoulder and her long, dark brown hair curled

down to her shoulders.

Jimmy asked Gemma how she had been marooned at the bottom of the well. He asked why everyone was sleeping. He had so many questions to ask.

Gemma sat on the edge of the well in the warm sunshine, drying her green tunic and hose and pointed hat, and told Jimmy what had happened: "It seems I've always lived at the bottom of the well, and it's my job to make sure that the bucket's full of water when the townsfolk come to the well. Whenever I want to come up to see my friends, all I have to do is sit in the bucket and someone will wind me up to the surface.

"The town had been a happy place to live; happy, that is, until the witch who lived in the house on the hill forgot how to laugh. She had always been such a friendly, happy witch and never used her magic spells for evil purposes - that is, until the day she forgot how to laugh. Yes! She forgot how to laugh. Her very best friend Ira, a sister witch, tried many different spells to try and make Matilda happy again but a heavy sadness had eaten into her heart. She had lost a special companion who had been with her for many, many years: Beatrix, a jet black cat with dark blue eyes. She was a very old cat and one day she just curled up on the bottom of the witch's bed as usual, went to sleep, and, well, never woke up again."

"How sad", said Jimmy.

Gemma continued her tale. "Matilda cried for days and none of her friends could comfort her. This went on for many weeks and eventually the sadness took away all her happiness and she didn't even want to laugh. Then another of Matilda's friends, Floella, had a bright idea. Her cat had just had kittens and one was the spitting image of Beatrix. Floella gave Matilda the kitten and over the next few weeks Matilda began to take an interest in things again. But she had been so sad for so

long that she had forgotten how to laugh.

“She came down to the town and asked the town’s folk to show her how to laugh again, and how they tried. They told her funny stories, they acted the fool, did lots of silly things, and even tried tickling her with feathers, but nothing they did could make the witch laugh. Then Matilda became angry. She became so angry that she waved her magic wand and cast a spell that put everyone into a deep sleep. And they would stay asleep until the day came when the witch could laugh again.”

Gemma had been lucky. Sort of. She had been at the bottom of the well when the witch waved her wand, and the spell missed her. But what could Jimmy do now to help his new friend? Gemma was too frightened to go anywhere near the witch's house, which was at the top of the hill on the south side of town. She was afraid to ask the witch if she would lift the magic spell of sleep, in case Matilda put her to sleep too, just like everyone else in the town.

Jimmy quickly made up his mind. Now that he had a new friend, he would show her how brave he could be. Jimmy was determined; he would go the house on the hill to see the witch who couldn't laugh and ask her to remove the magic spell.