

First three chapters of The Amazing Adventures of Jimmy Crikey

Chapter 1

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 schoolyard. 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, well they were simply ee-normous! 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 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 he was on, they always lost the game.

As a result, no one chose Jimmy to be their friend. He was totally excluded from their playgroups and gangs, just because he was 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 Esher 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 kiss.

Aunt Ethel Harper was kind, 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 darkness of the 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 started 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 narrowed to a pathway 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 noises of the night 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 which snapped and fell to the ground from a nearby 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, in the shaft. His fall was slowed by the tangle of tree roots that grew across the vertical shaft, but he still landed with a painful bump when he came to a sudden stop 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 of the hole there came the faintest glow of light. He moved the twigs and dried leaves to one side, looked out and rubbed his eyes in amazement. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Outside of the dark hole, there was a whole new world. Jimmy emerged into green fields swathed in wildflowers 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 for a while 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 which led towards what appeared to be a village or a town. Yes! There, in the distance, was - a small town. His pace quickened and he strode confidently down the path to the bottom of the hill, along the road towards 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 and his eenor-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. There was not a single person 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 on his toes and peered 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 his 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 small lady - sitting in a small boat.

"Well, don't just stand there looking at me," yelled the lady.

"Get me out of here."

"How can I do that?" Jimmy asked.

"Lower the bucket on the end of the rope," the echoing 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 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, "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 and 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, hose and pointed hat, and told Jimmy what had happened: "It seems I've

always lived in a small cave 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 was always 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 Witch 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 was 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 smile. 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 they certainly 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 in her home in the cave 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. Of course, he was afraid, but Jimmy was determined; he would go to the house on the hill to see the witch who couldn't laugh, and he would ask her to remove the magic spell.

Chapter 3

THE WITCH

That very same morning Gemma waved goodbye and Jimmy set off up the hill to the witch's house. He took long, bold paces as he marched off toward the old rambling house, but he didn't feel quite as brave as Gemma thought he was. The nearer he got to the big, forbidding house, the slower he walked. He saw a window at the side of the house and quietly crept closer, one step at a time. Very, very slowly, he stood up and peeped in through the grime coated window.

A black cauldron, bubbling and frothing, hung on a hook over an enormous log fire set in an arched stone hearth. Cooking implements, carving knives, spoons and forked prongs, hung from a long bar beneath the mantle shelf. Sitting on a three-legged stool, stirring the smoking mixture in the cauldron with a big wooden spoon, was the witch. She wore a traditional black pointed hat decorated in gold, with signs of the zodiac. A black shawl covered her shoulders and her dark green, plain and shapeless gown hung long to the floor. Only the toes of her black boots were visible beneath the hem. Long, straight black hair hung down from under her hat to reach the middle of her back. Curled around her feet was a green-eyed, jet-black cat.

The witch's red-rimmed eyes were focused on the cauldron, and from what Jimmy could see, tears were rolling down her cheeks as she rocked backwards and

forwards over the boiling pot. She was chanting a sad, tuneless lament as she tried to mix yet another brew that might help to make her laugh again. Every concoction she tried had failed: bat's wings, frog's spawn, spider's hairs, snake-skin oil, mashed worms and even toadstool stalks - but nothing in her book of spells would work.

Jimmy was no longer afraid. He could only feel sorry for the witch who couldn't laugh. He walked around to the front of the house and boldly raised the devil's head knocker that hung on the large wooden door. Knock! Knock! The witch didn't even get up off her stool. "Who's there?" she croaked. She knew it couldn't be anyone from the town because they were all under her sleeping spell.

Jimmy shouted through the letterbox. "Hello, Witch Matilda. My name is Jimmy. Please let me in. I know you're sad because you've forgotten how to laugh, and I've come to try to make you happy again so that you will remove the sleeping spell."

The witch lifted her head and looked quizzically towards the door. "Do you think you can make me laugh?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I would like to try," answered Jimmy. He heard her shuffling toward the door.

"If you can show me how to laugh," she said, "I will gladly lift the spell of sleep. Everyone will wake up and the town will become alive again."

She slowly opened the door which creaked on its hinges.

Her long nose preceded her chin as she thrust out her head and looked straight at Jimmy. She stopped, looked and looked again. Then, with the faintest of twinkles in her black-as-coal eyes, a small smile tugged lightly at the corners of her mouth

and spread slowly over her face. Then she chuckled, and finally, she burst into laughter. She laughed and laughed until the tears flowed in rivers down her cheeks.

Jimmy didn't quite know what to do, but soon he was laughing just as hard as the witch. When she recovered some of her breath, she took hold of Jimmy and hugged him. "Why, you're the strangest boy I have ever seen. That red mop of hair and small snub nose, those pointed ears and enormous feet, I have never seen anyone quite like you. Wherever have you come from?" Jimmy was ushered into the witch's house and sitting on a wooden chair, at a table covered with a red velvet tablecloth, he explained how he had left Aunt Ethel and then stumbled down a hole in the forest floor and discovered the underground world and how he came to the town where everyone except Gemma was asleep under Matilda's spell.

"I'm sorry if I was rude to you, Jimmy, but you have helped me to remember how to laugh, and now I shall keep my promise. Come with me, down to the town."

Holding tightly onto Jimmy's hand, she led him down the hill into the market square. When they stood next to the well Matilda took out a slim, silver wand from a fold in her green gown and waved it once over her head. The wand rose from her hand into the air and circled over the town, shedding beams of magic each time it turned in the air. Slowly the sleeping bodies stirred. Yawning and stretching, the townsfolk were soon wide awake and gathered around Matilda and Jimmy and Gemma.

The witch held up her hand to collect the returning wand and to quieten the crowd. Then she told them how this strange boy had been brave enough to come to her house on the hill to try and make her laugh. How he had looked so funny when

she opened the door that she quickly remembered how to laugh, and Jimmy had laughed with her. "But," she said, turning to Jimmy, "no one in Roombelow will ever laugh at you again. Your bravery has saved this town from the curse of my sleeping spell."

Mr McDonald, the bald, rather rotund Mayor, replied. "On behalf of the people of Roombelow, may I offer our thanks for what you have done for us today. Your bravery has earned our warmest praise. You're welcome to stay in Roombelow for as long as you wish. My house is your house Jimmy, and my wife, Amanda, and I would consider it an honour if you would stay with us as our guest."

Jimmy was overjoyed. He was hailed as a hero and had found a new home. Roombelow was a happy town again and he had found many new friends - Mr McDonald, the Mayor, his wife Amanda, Matilda the Witch, Gemma, the little lady who lived at the bottom of the well, and many, many more of the townsfolk folk. He decided that this was just the sort of place where he could happily live, with no more taunts about his strange appearance.

Now, running away is not usually a very sensible thing to do, but, just this once things seem to have worked out well.