lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

christopher mouse

the tale of a small traveller

written by
william wise

illustrated by
patrick benson

published by bloomsbury children's books

All text and images are copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

1

AT MRS CRIMMINS'S PLACE

My life began in the most commonplace way. I was born in an ordinary wire cage, on a soft bed of paper shavings. A few pieces of lettuce and a few lumps of cheese were strewn here and there.

At first my eyes remained shut so that I could not see anything around me. I slept most of the time, for I was very weak. I remember wondering why there was a rustling sound whenever I moved. But before long I grew so tired thinking about it that I fell asleep again.

Finally the day came when I was able to open my eyes. I saw the cage where I was lying and climbed unsteadily to my feet. Step by step I began to

explore. I nosed around among the papers; I sampled the lettuce and the cheese; I drank from the round saucer that stood in the corner. The surface of the water cast a reflection. In it, I saw myself for the first time—my eyes, my nose, my fur, and my whiskers.

Then, one after another, I met four beings who looked like my own image in the water. They were my three brothers, and my sister, Anna. She was smaller than they were, and from the beginning I knew I liked her best.

When my mother saw that I was up and about, she began to explain things to me. "You are a white mouse like the rest of us," she told me, "and you will live in this cage for six or seven weeks—until Mrs Crimmins comes to fetch you."

"Who is Mrs Crimmins?" I asked her.

"She is the woman who owns us," my mother said. "In fact, she owns everything in this room—the food we eat, the cage we live in—everything."

"Do you like Mrs Crimmins?" I asked.

My mother did not reply at once. She frowned and twitched her whiskers reflectively for several

moments, and then I heard her sigh. "I suppose I like her well enough," she told me. "She *might* treat us worse than she does. Some owners are good—though I suspect not many of them—and some owners are wicked. I imagine—but I can't be sure—that Mrs Crimmins falls somewhere in between."

Before I could ask her anything more, I heard a noise behind me. When I turned, I saw that a stout woman with bright red hair had come into the room. Mother told me it was Mrs Crimmins, bringing us our food.

I'll never forget the first time she opened our cage to feed us. There was a long trapdoor at the top of the cage. She slid it back, and as she did, I heard a terrible grating sound that made the fur along my spine stand on end.

Her fingers appeared at the opening. They held strips of bruised lettuce and bits of yellow, mouldy cheese. She dropped them into our cage, wriggling those fat fingers above our heads like five pale sausages. They were not a pretty sight to see.

Having given us the lettuce and cheese, she

dropped in our weekly treat—six well-salted mixed nuts. And they really *were* a treat for us. Many people think we dote on cheese, that it's our favorite food, but this simply is not true. Give any mouse a pecan or a walnut, an almond or a cashew, and he'll be extremely grateful. All mice have a passion for nuts, and that's the way to charm us if you should ever wish to.

I didn't know what to make of Mrs Crimmins after that. Certainly the food she fed us most of the time was nothing to boast of—especially the cheese, which must have been considerably older than I was myself. And yet, she was not entirely devoid of kindness, for she also provided us with a weekly treat of salted nuts. Was she good—or was she not? I began to see why my mother had answered me so vaguely.

I thought a great deal about Mrs Crimmins in the days that followed. If you are small and weak, and totally at the mercy of someone else, you have no choice but to consider the true nature of your owner; what she is like is extremely important to you.

As the days went by, I continued to observe Mrs Crimmins whenever I could. And the more I did, the more I began to wonder about something my mother had said the first time she spoke to me. It was a remark that often troubled me as I wandered around our cage, or as I played with my brothers and sister among the paper shavings and strips of lettuce underfoot.

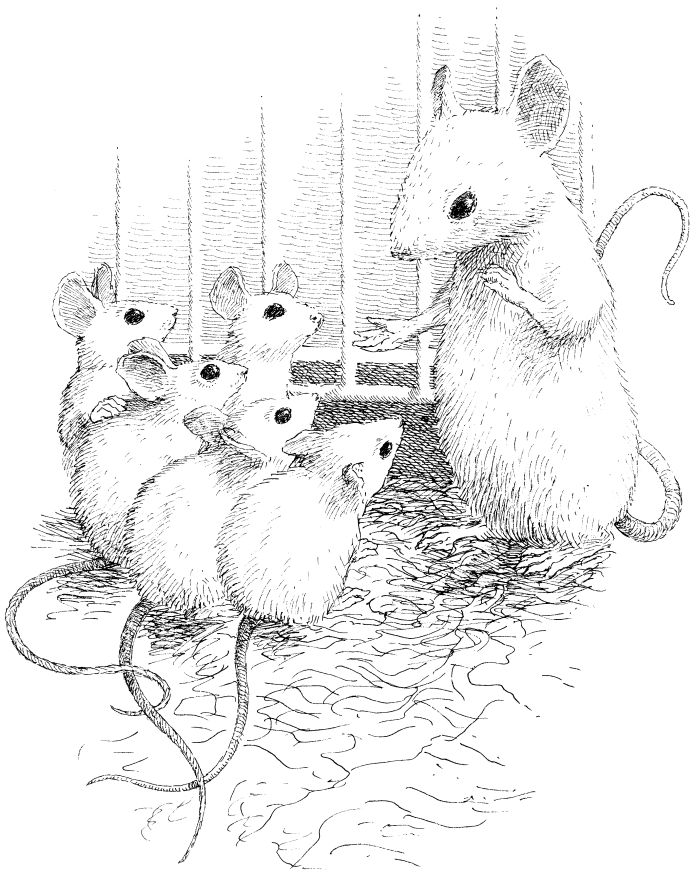
One day I decided I must know the answer. I came to my mother, who was sitting in a corner, and said, "You told me once that I would live here six or seven weeks—and then Mrs Crimmins would come to fetch me. What did you mean when you said that? *Why* will she come to fetch me?"

I saw a startled look in my mother's eyes. A grave expression stole across her face. She pretended to be unconcerned, but my question had pained her. I had never seen her upset before. Suddenly I felt a pang of fear.

My sister, Anna, and my three brothers must have felt the same anxiety. They began to crowd around me, until all five of us were sitting in a half circle at my mother's feet.

She remained silent for a moment more. "Very well," she said at last. "I will answer your question. I suppose the time has come when you must know what lies ahead."

We nodded solemnly. Our usual playfulness had disappeared. It was clear that what she intended to say was important. It seemed equally clear that some of it could be rather grim.



2

"WHEN MRS CRIMMINS COMES TO FETCH YOU"

"When Mrs Crimmins comes to fetch you," my mother said, "your days in this room will be over. You will never return. I have lived here for a long, long time, and have had many more children than just the five of you, and if there's one thing I've learned by now, it is this: when Mrs Crimmins comes with her cardboard box to take my children away, she takes them away for good."

The memory of her other children filled my mother's eyes with tears. To gain a little time to recover her composure, she turned and took a sip or two of water from the dish.