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A PEANUT BUTTER SANDWICH

“**I** told you to be careful,” scolded Keith, when his parents had gone to dress and Ralph had crawled down his arm into his hand.

“It wasn’t my fault the door blew shut.” Ralph jumped from the hand to the bedspread. Though Keith was a friendly boy, even a generous one, Ralph still did not like the feel of skin against his paws. It must be

terrible to go through life without fur and such a nuisance, having to wear clothes that had to be washed and drip-dried. Ralph knew all about drip-drying. Many were the drops of water from shirts and slippers that he had dodged going in and out of his mouse-hole.

"You didn't have to stay out so long," Keith pointed out as he began to dress.

"What's the use of having a motorcycle if you can't go tearing around staying out late?" Ralph asked reasonably.

"You don't have a motorcycle," said Keith. "I just let you use mine. And you better be careful. I like that motorcycle and I don't want anything to happen to it."

"I'll take care of it," promised Ralph, somewhat chastened. "I don't want anything to happen to it either."

"It's going to be harder to get a chance to ride it now that my mother has seen you,"

said Keith. "She's a terribly good housekeeper and she's sure to complain to the management."

"Speaking of breakfast, you people are too tidy," complained Ralph. "I'm not getting enough to eat around here. You don't leave any crumbs."

"I never thought of it," said Keith. "What would you like to eat?"

Ralph was astounded. This was the first time in his life anyone had asked him what he would like to eat. It had always been a question of what he could get his paws on. "You mean I have a choice?" he asked, incredulous.

"Sure," said the boy. "All I have to do is order it when we go down to breakfast and then bring you some."

Ralph had to take time to think. After a diet of zwieback and graham crackers provided by little children, bits of candy and

an occasional peanut or apple core left by medium-sized children, or a crust of toast and a dab of jam left by an adult who had ordered breakfast sent up from room service, the possibilities of choosing his own meal were almost too much.

"I know what I'd like," Ralph said at last, "but I don't know what you call it. Once some people who said they were almost out of money stayed in these rooms. They had four children, all of them hungry, and they couldn't afford to go to the dining room so they got some bread and spread it with something brown out of a jar and put some more bread on top of that. They whispered all the time they were eating, because they didn't want the maid or bellboy to know they were having a meal in their room. Afterwards they all got down on their hands and knees and picked up every single crumb on the carpet so no one would guess they

had eaten in their rooms. It was a great disappointment. It smelled so good. Like peanuts only better."

The boy laughed. "It was a peanut butter sandwich. Sure, I'll bring you a peanut butter sandwich. Or part of one. I'll eat part of it myself. It'll be kind of a funny breakfast, but I won't mind that."

"Where will you leave it?" asked Ralph.

Keith thought a minute. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"In the knothole under the window."

"No kidding!" Keith laughed. "That's the hole I poked my finger in last night."

"I'll say you did," said Ralph. "Scared me out of a year's growth. Nobody has ever guessed it's a mousehole because it's a knot-hole instead of a chewed hole."

"I tell you what," said Keith. "I'll bring up part of a peanut butter sandwich and poke it through the knothole."

"Just like room service!" Ralph could not have been more pleased with the suggestion. "Uh—what about the motorcycle?" he asked. "Where are you going to leave that?"

"In my suitcase, I guess."

"Aw, come on," pleaded Ralph. "Have a heart. Leave it someplace where I can get it while you're out during the day."

"You're supposed to be in your mouse-hole asleep, not riding around in the daylight where people can see you."

"Well, gee whiz, can't a fellow even look at it?" asked Ralph. "I bet you like to look at big motorcycles yourself."

"Yes, I do," admitted the boy. "Well—I'll leave it back under the bed like I said, but you promise not to ride it until after dark."

"Scout's honor." Ralph jumped off the bed and ran off to the knothole.

Ralph's home was furnished with a clutter of things people drop on the floor of a

hotel room—bits of Kleenex, hair, ravelings. His mother was always planning to straighten it out, but she never got around to it. She was always too busy fussing and worrying. Now, as Ralph expected, she was dividing Ry-Krisp crumbs among his squeaky bunch of little brothers and sisters while she waited to scold him.

“Ralph, if I have told you once, I have told you a thousand times—” she began.

“Guess what!” interrupted Ralph in an attempt to change the subject. “Somebody in 215 is going to bring us a real peanut butter sandwich!”

“Ralph!” cried his frightened mother. “You haven’t been associating with *people*!”

“Aw, he’s just a boy,” said Ralph, deciding to keep the complete story of the dangers and the glories of the past night to himself. “He wouldn’t hurt us. He likes mice.”

“But he’s a *person*,” said his mother.



“That doesn’t mean he has to be bad,” said Ralph. “Just like Pop used to say, people shouldn’t say all mice are timid just because some mice are. Or that all mice play when the cat’s away just because some do.”

“Just the same, Ralph,” said his mother. “I do wish you would be more careful

whom you associate with. I am so afraid you'll fall in with the wrong sort of friends."

"I'm growing up," said Ralph. "I'm getting too old to hang around a mouse nest all the time. I want to go out and see the world. I want to go down on the ground floor and see the kitchen and the dining room and the storeroom and the garbage cans out back."

"Oh, Ralph," cried his mother. "Not the ground floor. Not all the way down there. You aren't old enough."

"Yes, I am," said Ralph stoutly.

"There's no telling what you might run into down there—mousetraps, cats, poison. Why, out by the garbage cans you might even be seen by an owl."

"I don't care," said Ralph. "Someday I'm going downstairs."

"But think of the owls, Ralph," implored his mother. "We moved into the hotel because of the owls. It was after your Uncle

Leroy disappeared and his bones were found in an owl pellet—”

The mother mouse's plea was interrupted by the sound of Keith returning to Room 215. “Now you'll see,” said Ralph to his mother and waited, anxious lest his friend let him down.

Sure enough, Keith came to the knot-hole. “Psst!” he whispered. “Here it is. The waitress thought I was crazy, ordering a peanut butter sandwich along with my cornflakes for breakfast, but here it is.” He stuffed half a sandwich a bit at a time into the hole, where Ralph seized the pieces and pulled them all the way through. “Listen, we're going to be gone most of the day. The dining room is packing us a picnic lunch, and we're going to drive along some of the back roads and visit some old mining towns.”

“Thanks a lot!” Ralph managed to say

with his mouth watering. "Have fun."

"See you tonight," said Keith. "Have a good day's sleep."

Ralph's mother could not help being impressed by the sight of that peanut butter sandwich. "Just like room service," she marveled. "Why, it's a peanut butter and *jelly* sandwich and it even has butter in it."

"I told you he would bring it." Ralph could not help boasting, even though his mouth was full.

After sharing his feast with his squeaky little brothers and sisters, all of whom had trouble with peanut butter sticking to their teeth, Ralph curled up on a heap of shredded Kleenex and took a good long nap. When he awoke refreshed, his first thought was of the motorcycle. He wondered if Keith really had remembered to leave it under the bed. He yawned and stretched and left by way of the knothole.

Room 215 was just as Ralph had last seen

it. The bed had not been made and there were no fresh towels by the washbasin. Ralph ducked under the sheets and blankets that had tumbled off one side of the bed, and there in the dim light he caught the gleam of chromium exhaust pipes. Keith had trusted him after all! He walked across the carpet and took hold of the handgrips once more. They felt just right in his paws and he longed to be off, speeding around the threadbare spots on the carpet, but a promise was a promise. Keith had kept his promise about the peanut butter sandwich; Ralph would keep his about not riding the motorcycle in the daytime. He tried to satisfy himself by walking around the motorcycle in the dim light under the bed, admiring all over again the sleek design of the machine.

Ralph was lost in admiration and daydreams of speed and power when suddenly the door opened and the maid entered. It

was too late to make a dash for the mousehole. The maid stripped the blankets and sheets from the beds, shedding unwelcome light on Ralph and the motorcycle. Her feet in white sneakers moved lightly as she gathered up the sheets and pillowcases and towels and dropped them with a soft plop beside the open door.

The next thing Ralph knew, he was hearing familiar and dreaded footsteps coming down the hall, steps he had learned to fear when he was a tiny mouse. It was the head housekeeper, the woman who was in charge of all the maids in the hotel. He recognized her steps and he recognized her shoes—stout, sensible black oxfords. Nothing was ever clean enough for the head housekeeper, and Ralph's whole family lived in dread lest she discover their mousehole. Now he held his breath, hoping she would go on down the hall, but no, she stepped into Room 215.

"Good morning, Margery." The housekeeper spoke crisply to the maid. "Be sure you clean 215 and 216 very thoroughly this morning. There has been a complaint from the guests. They suspect mice."

"Yes, ma'am," said the maid.

"Look behind all the drawers," continued the housekeeper, "and in the corners of the closets. Please report any evidence of mice. And be sure you vacuum under the beds. You have been getting careless lately." With that she walked briskly down the hall.

"Old grouch," muttered the maid, as she reached into the hall for something that produced a sound that struck terror into Ralph's heart.

It was the clang of vacuum cleaner attachments banging together.

7

THE VACUUM CLEANER

From his position under the bed Ralph watched the tank of the vacuum cleaner being dragged in from the hall and listened to the clash and clang of the attachments as the maid connected a long metal tube to the nozzle at the end of the hose and fastened a carpet-cleaning part to the end of the tube. He heard her humming to herself as she plugged in the deadly machine and began to work it back and forth across the carpet.

It's nice she's so happy, thought Ralph bitterly, as he watched the hungry machine devour dust and lint that lay in its path.

The maid's feet in white sneakers moved across the room until, without bothering to bend down to see where she was cleaning, she shoved the attachment under the bed. It slid closer and closer to Ralph. To be on the safe side he pushed the motorcycle farther from the reach of the machine, but he dared not take his eyes off the attachment for even an instant. He shuddered as he watched it gobble a dust mouse, but even as he shuddered he was fascinated by the power of the motor.

The maid began to sing. "I'll give to you a paper of pins, for that's the way my love begins." The attachment fell off the end of the long tube, but the maid, whose thoughts were elsewhere, did not notice. Now Ralph could feel the machine suck in its breath

and knew he was in danger of being inhaled along with the dust mice.

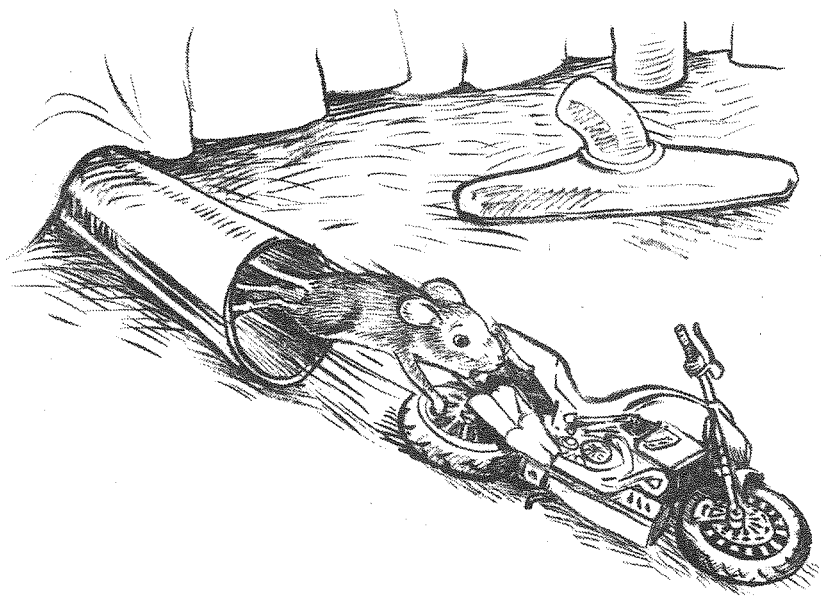
Recklessly the maid pushed the open end of the tube back and forth any old way. There was no guessing which way it would go next. Ralph had to run with the motorcycle to avoid that terrifying hole at the end of the tube. He ran to the right, he ran to the left, and still the maid pushed the tube around, unaware that the attachment had fallen off.

Suddenly the maid threw down the tube but did not turn off the motor. The tube landed with a bump and a bounce, and before Ralph realized what was happening the awful machine had inhaled his tail and he felt himself being pulled by suction across the carpet.

"Help!" he could not keep from squeaking, but no one heard him above the roar of the machine. He just managed to catch the rear wheel of the motorcycle as he was

sucked along the carpet. He hung on with all his strength. The machine, which was strong enough to suck up a mouse, was not strong enough to suck up a mouse and a motorcycle. Ralph lay there on his stomach, hanging on for dear life and feeling his whiskers and fur swept back toward the machine.

From his position on his stomach Ralph could see the girl standing in front of the



dresser. She was smiling at herself in the mirror and arranging her hair, dreaming, no doubt, of the busboy. Ralph despaired. There was no telling how long she would stand there in that silly way. With the vacuum cleaner motor making so much noise, the housekeeper was sure to think she was busy working.

Ralph felt his paws beginning to slip. He did not know how much longer he could hold out against the machine. He had to think of something and think of it fast. With every bit of strength he had left in his body, he clung to the wheels of the motorcycle with his left paw while he moved his right paw up to the exhaust pipe. If he could just manage to pull himself along until he could get on the motorcycle . . .

Bit by bit, hand over hand, Ralph dragged himself forward along the exhaust pipe. He knew he was making progress

when he could see part of his tail once more. He reached back and yanked his tail out of the tube only to have it sucked in again. Ralph was far from being out of danger.

"I'll give to you the keys to my heart," the maid sang to herself before the mirror, now pulling her hair behind her ears, now piling it on top of her head, oblivious to the desperate struggle under the bed.

Once, Ralph's paw slipped from the exhaust pipe and he thought he was a goner until he caught the rear wheel in time to save himself. Slowly he moved forward until his entire tail was free. Things were easier when he could brace his hind foot against the spokes of the rear wheel. Slowly he rose, clinging to the machine, until he was able to grasp the handgrips and throw his leg over the seat.

Ralph felt considerably safer sitting on

the motorcycle and very much pleased with himself for having outwitted the vacuum cleaner. He was quite sure by now that the maid would never bother to look under the bed. He tried to move forward, propelling the cycle with his feet, but he found the suction from the motor behind him was too strong. This made him wonder if the motor on Keith's cycle was stronger than the pull of the machine behind him. The more Ralph thought about it, the more important it seemed to him to find out.

No, I won't. Yes, I will, Ralph argued with himself. He had promised not to ride in the daytime. Yes, but Keith did not know he would have a chance to see which was stronger, the motorcycle or the vacuum cleaner. Keith would be interested, wouldn't he? Wouldn't any boy? Riding the motorcycle would not be reckless. It would be an important experiment. Motorcycle versus

vacuum cleaner—which would be the winner? Ralph had to find out.

The maid turned abruptly from the mirror. Her feet in sneakers moved across the floor toward the electric outlet. If she disconnected the vacuum cleaner there would be no experiment. If Ralph was going to pit one motor against the other, he had to do it now. He would never have another chance.

Pb-pb-b-b-b. Ralph picked up his tail and started the motor. Without taking time to let it warm up, he gunned it with all the breath he could inhale. The motorcycle got off to a faster start than Ralph expected, so fast that Ralph lost control. He shot out from under the bed just as the vacuum cleaner died with a long drawn-out groan.

Suddenly everything went white and Ralph found himself bumping along in a strange ghostly place all white and made of cloth that seemed to be closing in on him

from every direction. Ralph had ridden straight into a pillowcase thrown on the heap of laundry the maid had dropped on the floor, and the opening of the pillowcase had fallen shut behind him.

Ralph had no idea which way was out. He dismounted from the motorcycle and beat at the cloth with his fists, but everywhere he struck it was soft and yielding. He stamped his feet only to have the cloth give softly and silently beneath him.

He began to wade through the pillowcase, tugging the motorcycle along behind him while he wondered why he had thought it so important to test the motorcycle against the vacuum cleaner. The light, filtered through unknown layers of cloth, was dim, and he sank to his knees in bed linen with every step. When he came to a seam he knew he had been wading in the wrong direction.

"Drat," muttered Ralph. He turned, still dragging the motorcycle, and tried to retrace his footsteps only to find he had no idea which way he had come. There were no landmarks. The clouds of cloth were white, billowy, and yielding in all directions. "Double drat!" He stamped his foot, only to find himself sinking deeper into the linen.

From the swishing sounds he could hear outside, Ralph knew the maid must be unfolding clean sheets over the bed. He plodded on, dragging the motorcycle, without direction and with very little hope.

"He promised to buy me a bunch of blue ribbons," sang the maid, "to tie up my bonnie brown hair."

Down the hall a door opened. Ralph heard a muffled "Wuf!" and in a moment the click of a small dog's toenails on the bare floor at the edge of the hall carpet, followed by sniffing that was dangerously close.

The little terrier began to bark. "I know you're in there!" he yipped. "Stick out your tongue and waggle your fingers at me, will you? You just wait!" Paws began to scrape at the sheets and pillowcases as if the dog were trying to dig a hole.

Ralph decided it was wiser not to talk back to the dog. He huddled, scarcely breathing, against the motorcycle.

"Well, hello, you cute little thing," said the maid, revealing to Ralph that she was even sillier than he had thought. As if there was anything cute about a terrier that could scarcely see through his own hair.

The dog went on yapping, a bit self-consciously, Ralph thought, now that he knew he was being admired by the maid. A man's steps came thumping down the hall.

"Stop your racket, you pesky mutt," said the owner's voice, and Ralph knew when the barks suddenly came from above him



that the dog had been snatched up.

“Let me down and I’ll dig him out,”
yapped the dog as he was carried away.
“Just let me down for one minute and I’ll
show you!”

Suddenly Ralph felt himself being tumbled about in the pillowcase. He did not even have to think what to do—he automatically grabbed for the motorcycle and held on with all his strength. Even though he had been tipped upside down with his feet in the air, Ralph knew he was being lifted up inside the bundle of bed linen and carried down the hall. He lay still, his front paws locked around the front wheel of the motorcycle, waiting to see what would happen next. The maid walked a short distance to what Ralph judged to be the linen room, and there she dumped her armload of bedding before she went off to clean another room.

Ralph was deep in the hamper where no light filtered through at all. These sheets and pillowcases were on their way to the laundry, and since he had no wish to be laundered, any more than he had wished to be thrown out with the trash, there was

only one thing for him to do. Start chewing. Ralph ripped into the pillowcase with his sharp teeth and in no time he had made a ragged hole, which he crawled through. When he tried to pull the motorcycle after him, he discovered the hole was too small. He had to stop and chew it bigger before he could pull the machine along with him.

Ralph chewed through another layer of cloth and then another as he worked his way upward, each time enlarging the hole for the motorcycle. His jaws began to ache and still another layer of cloth lay ahead, this time a damp bath towel, which would make slow chewing.

Ralph was forced to make a decision. Did he want to save his life or did he want to be carried off to the laundry with the motorcycle? There was only one answer. He wanted to save his life. He must abandon the motorcycle.

With aching jaws Ralph chewed onward and upward, moving faster now that he was making mouse-sized holes instead of motorcycle-sized holes. The bath towel had left an unpleasant furry taste in his mouth. Gradually light began to filter through the cloth until finally, when Ralph thought he could not force his jaws to close on one more mouthful of fiber, he emerged into daylight at the top of the hamper.

“Whew!” Ralph gasped, rubbing his aching jaws and wading across the sheets to the edge of the hamper. He leaped lightly to the floor and, hugging the baseboard, scurried down the hall to Room 215, where he flattened himself and squeezed under the door. Safe but exhausted and filled with remorse at the loss of Keith’s motorcycle, Ralph dragged himself off to the mousehole to catch up on the sleep he should have had that day.

8

A FAMILY REUNION

The next thing Ralph knew, his mother was shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up," she said. "Ralph, wake up. Room service has brought us another meal."

"Room service?" Ralph rubbed his eyes, not believing what he had heard. "Room service has brought *our* dinner?"

"Yes, a real feast. A whole blueberry muffin and a chocolate-chip cookie," said

Ralph's mother. "Get up. We are having a family reunion."

It all came back to Ralph. "Oh, room service," he said, understanding at last. "You mean the boy. Keith."

"He is room service to me." Ralph's mother sounded happy and carefree.

Ralph sat up. Already his aunts and uncles and many squeaky cousins were arriving by the secret paths in the space between the walls. It was a long time since anyone had had enough food for a family reunion, and there was rejoicing in the mouse nest for everyone but Ralph. He was thinking of the motorcycle he had lost and the promise he had broken. He had a dull, heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach and he did not feel like celebrating.

"Why, there's Ralph," squeaked his Aunt Sissy, who thought she was better than the rest of the family because she

lived in the bridal suite where, she led her relatives to believe, riches of rice fell to the carpet when the bride took off her hat and the groom shook out his coat. The rest of the family knew Aunt Sissy was not as grand as she pretended to be, because very few brides and grooms came to this hotel these days. "My, how you've grown."

Ralph never knew what to say when people told him how he had grown.

"Well, well! If it isn't Ralph!" said Uncle Lester, who had a nest inside the wall of the housekeeper's office, where the maids dropped doughnut crumbs every morning at ten o'clock when they had their coffee. "What's this I hear about you riding up and down the halls on a motorcycle?" Uncle Lester had a way of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

"My land, a motorcycle," said old Aunt Dorothy. "Isn't that pretty dangerous?"

"Wouldn't mind riding one myself if I were a few years younger," said Uncle Lester.

All the little cousins came crowding around Ralph. "Show us your motorcycle," they squeaked. "We want to ride it. Come on, give us a ride on your motorcycle, Ralph. Huh, Ralph? Come on, Ralph. Please!"

Ralph knew he was expected to be polite to all his relatives, even the squeaky little cousins. "Well . . ." Embarrassed and ashamed, he looked down at the floor. "I sort of . . . lost the motorcycle. In a pile of sheets and pillowcases."

"Lost the motorcycle! Oh, Ralph," cried his mother, genuinely alarmed.

Ralph knew what she was thinking. Did this mean the end of room service? Did she have to go back to pilfering crumbs for his brothers and sisters?

"That's a young mouse for you," said tactless Uncle Lester. "Can't take care of anything."

"If anybody asks me, I think it's a good thing he lost it," said Aunt Dorothy. "Riding a motorcycle is just plain foolhardy."

All the little cousins looked disappointed and sulky. "I don't think he ever had a motorcycle," said one.

"I bet he just made it up," said another, and the rest agreed.

Ralph felt terrible. The family reunion swirled on around him. The muffin and cookie were divided. Cousins fought over the blueberries. Uncles, usually overweight uncles, asked for second helpings. Everyone talked at once. The little cousins finished their dinner and went racing around the mouse nest. The aunts and uncles raised their voices to be heard above the racket their children made.

Suddenly there came from the knothole a noise that drowned out the squeaks and squeals of young mice at play.

“Sh-h-h!”

Not a mouse moved. They looked at one another, too terrified to speak.

“Pst! Hey, Ralph, come on out,” whispered Keith at the entrance to the mouse nest.

Ralph’s mother gave him a little shove, but no one spoke. With heavy feet Ralph walked to the knothole, but he did not go out into Room 215. “What do you want?” he asked.

“You and your family better be quiet in there or my mother will hear you. You know how she is about mice,” Keith said. “I don’t know why people say things are as quiet as mice. You sound like a pretty noisy bunch to me.”

Behind Ralph his relatives began to tiptoe

quietly away to their own homes, leaving his mother to do all the cleaning up. "Did you have a nice picnic?" Ralph asked, dreading what he must tell the boy.

"Yes. We saw an old mining town with a real jail with bars on the windows."

Keith reached into his pocket and pulled out something curved and hard and white with a rubber band fastened to it with a piece of Scotch tape. "I brought you a present," he said. "Come on out."

Puzzled and curious, Ralph squeezed through the knothole. "What is it?" he asked. Whatever the object was, he had never seen anything like it.

"Half a Ping-Pong ball I found down in the game room," said Keith. "See, I padded the inside with thistledown and anchored the rubber band to the top with Scotch tape."

"What for?" Ralph still did not understand.

"A crash helmet for you." Keith set the half Ping-Pong ball on Ralph's head and slipped the rubber band carefully around his whiskers until it rested under his chin. "There. That's just right. You need it big so there will be plenty of room for your ears. When you ride a motorcycle you need a crash helmet."

Ralph peered at Keith from under his new crash helmet, which rested lightly on his head. He knew he looked every inch a motorcycle racer, but never in his whole life had he felt so ashamed. He longed to crawl off into his hole and never face Keith again, but his conscience, which until now he did not know he had, would not let him. There was nothing to do but stand there in his fine new crash helmet and confess. "You might as well know," he told Keith. "I lost the motorcycle."

"Lost the motorcycle!" Keith, who had



been kneeling, sat back on his heels. "But how?"

"I rode it by mistake into a pillowcase in a heap of linen on the floor, and it got

dumped into the laundry hamper," confessed Ralph.

"You *rode* it into the pillowcase!" repeated Keith. "But you weren't supposed to ride it in the daytime. You *promised*."

"I know," agreed Ralph miserably. "I didn't exactly mean to ride it."

"Well, you see, the maid was vacuuming under the bed and I—" began Ralph, and stopped. "Oh, what's the use. I rode it and I lost it and it's probably gone to the laundry by now and I'm sorry."

The boy and the mouse were silent. Both were thinking about the little motorcycle with its clean lines and pair of shining chromium exhaust pipes.

"That motorcycle was my very most favorite of all my cars," said Keith. "I saved my allowance and bought it myself."

Ralph hung his head in his crash helmet. There was nothing more he could say. It

was a terrible thing he had done.

"I guess I should have known you weren't old enough to be trusted with a motorcycle," said Keith.

The boy could not have said anything that would hurt Ralph more.

9

RALPH TAKES COMMAND

It was a sad night for Ralph, a sad and lonely night. If he went back to the mousehole, his mother was sure to worry him with embarrassing questions about the motorcycle. She would also expect him to help clean up after the family reunion. If he took off his crash helmet, he could squeeze under the door and explore the hall on foot, but he could not bear to part with the helmet

and, anyway, he had no desire to travel by foot where he had once ridden with such noise and speed.

Ralph scurried through shadows on the floor to the curtain, which he climbed to the windowsill. There he sat, huddled and alone, staring out into the night listening to the kissing sounds of the bats as they jerked and zigzagged from the eaves of the hotel, through the pines, and back again. Around the window the leaves of a Virginia creeper vine shifted in the breeze, and down in the lobby a clock struck midnight. An owl slid silently through the night across the clearing of the parking lot from one pine to another. Ralph could remember a time when he had envied bats and owls their ability to fly, but that was before he had experienced the speed and power of a motorcycle.

Early in the morning the smell of bacon drifting up from the kitchen brought back

all Ralph's dreams of the ground floor. It was not long until he was embarrassed to discover that Keith was awake and was lying quietly in bed watching him.

"Hi," said Keith.

"Oh, hello." Ralph wished he had returned to the mousehole before dawn. "Well, I guess it's about time for me to go home to bed."

Keith sat up. "Don't go yet. Wait until my folks get up."

Ralph leaped to the floor. "I didn't think you would want to talk to me after I lost your motorcycle."

"I may never have another chance to talk to a mouse."

Ralph was flattered. It had never occurred to him that a boy would consider talking to a mouse anything special.

"What would you like for breakfast?" asked Keith.

"You mean we still get room service? After what I did?"

"Sure." Keith pulled his knees up under his chin and wrapped his arms around his legs.

"You mean you aren't mad at me anymore?" asked Ralph.

"I guess you might say I'm mad but not *real* mad," Keith decided. "I've been lying here thinking. It wouldn't be right for me to be *real* mad, because I get into messes myself. My mom and dad tell me I don't stop to use my head."

Ralph nodded. "I guess that's my trouble, too. I don't stop to use my head."

"They say I'm in too much of a hurry," said Keith. "They say I don't want to take time to learn to do things properly."

Ralph nodded again. He understood. If he had waited until he had learned to ride the motorcycle he would never have ridden off the bedside table into the wastebasket.

"I'll never forget the first time I rode a bicycle with hand brakes," reminisced Keith. "I took right off down a hill. I had always ridden bicycles with foot brakes, and when I got going too fast I tried to put on foot brakes only there weren't any."

"What happened?" Ralph was fascinated.

"By the time I remembered to use the hand brakes I hit a tree and took an awful spill."

Somehow, this story made Ralph feel better. He was not the only one who got into trouble.

"The hard part is," continued Keith, "I *am* in a hurry. I don't want to do kid things. I want to do big things. Real things. I want to grow up."

"You look pretty grown up to me," said Ralph.

"Maybe to a mouse," conceded Keith, "but I want to look grown up to grown-ups."

"So do I," said Ralph with feeling. "I want to grow up and go down to the ground floor."

"Everybody tells me to be patient," said Keith, "but I don't want to be patient."

"Me neither," agreed Ralph. Someone stirred next door in Room 216. "Well, I guess I better be running along," said Ralph. "Say, about that breakfast—"

"Sure. What do you want?"

"How about some bacon?" suggested Ralph, remembering the fragrance that had floated up to the windowsill.

"And some toast?"

"With jelly," agreed Ralph, and ran off to the mousehole, eager to tell his family things were not so bad after all. They were still entitled to room service.

But when Ralph reached the mousehole he found pandemonium. His brothers and sisters and cousins were huddled together



squeaking with fright. His mother picked up a bunch of shredded Kleenex and put it down again, only to pick up another bunch as if she did not know what to do with it. Uncle Lester and Aunt Dorothy were there, too, stuffing crumbs into their mouths as if they expected never to eat again.

“Dear me,” Ralph’s mother was saying,



“whatever shall we—oh Ralph, there you are at last. Where on earth have you been? Never mind. We haven’t time—”

“Time for what?” asked Ralph. “What’s going on around here anyway?”

“The housekeeper . . . your Uncle Lester . . . the sheets. Oh, do be quiet, everybody.” Ralph’s mother was so agitated

she could not tell her son what was wrong.

Uncle Lester swallowed a mouthful of crumbs. "It's like this, Ralph. The housekeeper discovered a hamperful of sheets and towels and pillowcases with holes chewed in them."

Oh-oh, thought Ralph. Whatever had happened was all his fault. He might have known.

"I heard her telephoning the manager about it from her office," continued Uncle Lester. "The manager came up and called in all the maids and the bellboys and everyone had to look at the holes chewed in the sheets. It was quite a powwow."

The motorcycle, thought Ralph. What happened to the motorcycle? There might be a chance it did not go to the laundry after all. "You didn't happen to see a motorcycle in the housekeeper's office, did you?" he ventured.

"I was listening, not looking out," said Uncle Lester. "I am not foolhardy like some people around here."

"Ralph, you know what this means." His mother managed to pull herself together to say that much.

"It means *war on mice*," said Aunt Dorothy ominously.

"It means traps, poisons," said Uncle Lester. "Who knows? This time the management might even spend money on an exterminator. We shall have to flee. There is nothing else to do."

"And if we flee the owls will get us," said Ralph's mother, causing the brothers and sisters and cousins to set up an awful squeal. "Sh-h!" The mother mouse fluttered her paws in alarm.

"Flee?" Ralph was bewildered. "Flee and leave room service?"

"Room service!" exclaimed his mother.

"How can we expect room service after you lost that poor boy's motorcycle?"

"It's all right," Ralph assured his mother, and could not resist adding rather grandly, "I've already ordered. Room service is bringing us bacon and toast with jelly."

This news silenced everyone. A breakfast of bacon and toast with jelly delivered to the mouse nest without first being dropped on the carpet was not to be abandoned lightly.

"We want some jelly! We want some jelly!" all the little cousins began to squeak.

"Be quiet!" ordered Uncle Lester. "Do you want them to find us?"

Ralph knew that no matter what the others chose to do, he was not going to flee from the hotel, not until he found out what had happened to the motorcycle. He was very sure of this and all at once he felt calm and clearheaded as he had never felt before. He knew exactly what his family should do.

"Be quiet, everybody," Ralph ordered, standing up straight so all his relatives could see him. "I will tell you what we are going to do."

"See here, Ralph," interrupted Uncle Lester. "You are pretty young to be giving orders to your elders."

"Now Lester," said Aunt Dorothy. "Let's listen to Ralph. After all, he has our food brought up by room service. No one else in the history of the family has managed that."

This silenced Uncle Lester and Ralph was allowed to continue. "What we should do is keep quiet for a few days." Here he looked down at his little cousins, who for once in their lives were not squeaking. "I will arrange for room service to bring our meals so we won't have to go scrabbling around in the woodwork or scrounging around in the rooms. That way we won't be tempted to taste any poison food or

go near any traps, and if the management doesn't see or hear any of us for a few days, they will forget about us. They always do."

"Now just a minute," said Uncle Lester. "This boy won't be here long. You know how it is with people. Here today and gone tomorrow."

Ralph had the answer. "This is only Sunday. He will be here until Tuesday because Monday is the Fourth of July and his father says he won't drive in holiday weekend traffic. He always brings us plenty and if we don't stuff ourselves we can save enough to last until the management forgets us."

Uncle Lester nodded thoughtfully. "That seems like a sound idea."

"Yes, but Ralph, there is one thing that worries me," said his mother. "How are we going to tip room service? When people have a waiter bring food to the room they always give him a coin or two for his service. We haven't any money."

Ralph had not thought of this.

"If we are going to continue to accept room service we must do the right thing," insisted his mother.

"Don't worry. I'll think of something," promised Ralph in the grand way he had acquired since he had ordered a meal sent up to the mouse nest.