

EIGHT

Tucker's Life's Savings

Chester Cricket was having a dream. In his dream he was sitting on top of his stump back in Connecticut, eating a leaf from the willow tree. He would bite off a piece of leaf, chew it up, and swallow it, but for some reason it didn't taste as good as usual. There was something dry and papery about it, and it had a bitter flavor. Still, Chester kept eating, hoping that it would begin to taste better.

A storm came up in his dream. The wind blew clouds of dust across the meadow. They swirled around his stump, and Chester began to sneeze because the dust got in his nose. But he still held on to the leaf. And then he sneezed such a big sneeze that it woke him up.

Chester looked around him. He had been walking in his sleep and he was sitting on the edge of the cash register. The storm had been a gust of air that blew into

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the newsstand when the shuttle pulled up to the station. He was still choking from the dirt that flew around him. Chester looked down at his two front legs, half expecting to find the willow leaf. But it was no leaf he was holding. It was a two-dollar bill and he had already eaten half of it.

He dropped the bill and leaped over to the cricket cage, where Tucker Mouse was sleeping peacefully. Chester shook the silver bell furiously; it rang like a fire alarm. Tucker jumped out from under his blanket of dollar bills and ran around the cage shouting, "Help! Fire! Murder! Police!"

Then he realized where he was and sat down panting. "What is the matter with you, Chester?" he said. "I could have died from fright."

"I just ate half of a two-dollar bill," said Chester.

Tucker stared at him with disbelief. "You did *what*?" he asked.

"Yes," said Chester, "look." He fetched the ruined two-dollar bill from the cash register. "I dreamed it was a leaf and I ate it."

"Oh oh oh oh," moaned Tucker Mouse. "Not a one-dollar bill—not even a one-dollar bill and a fifty-cent piece—*two dollars* you had to eat! And from the Bellinis too—people who hardly make two dollars in two days."

"What am I going to do?" asked Chester.

"Pack your bags and go to California," said Tucker.



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Chester shook his head. "I can't," he said. "They've been so good to me—I can't run away."

Tucker Mouse shrugged his shoulders. "Then stay and take the rap," he said. He crept out of the cage and examined the remains of the money. "There's still half of it left. Maybe we could put Scotch Tape along the edge and pass it off as a one-dollar bill."

"No one would believe it," said Chester. He sat down, still forlornly holding the bill. "Oh dear—and things were going along so nicely."

Tucker Mouse put his bedclothes back in the cash register drawer and came to sit beside Chester. "Buck up," he said. "We could still figure something out, maybe."

They both concentrated for a minute. Then Tucker clapped his paws and squeaked, "I got it! Eat the rest of it and they'll never know what happened."

"They'd accuse each other of losing it," said Chester. "I don't want to make any bad feeling between them."

"Oh, you're so honorable!" said Tucker. "It's disgusting."

"Besides, it tastes bad," added Chester.

"Then how about this." Tucker had a new idea. "We frame the janitor who cleans the station. I'll take the evidence over and plant it in his water closet. He whopped me with a mop last week. I would be glad to see him go to jail for a few days."

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"No, no," said Chester. "We can't get somebody else in trouble."

"Then a stranger," said Tucker. "We tip over the Kleenex, break the glass in the alarm clock, and throw all the small change on the floor. They'll think a thief came in the night. You could even put a bandage on and make out like a hero. I could see it all—"

"No!" Chester interrupted him. "The damage we'd do would cost even more than the two dollars."

Tucker had one more idea: he was going to volunteer to go over and swipe two dollars from the lunch counter. But before he could suggest that, the top of the stand was suddenly lifted off. They had forgotten what time it was. Mama Bellini, who was on duty in the morning, stood towering, frowning down on them. Tucker let out a squeak of fear and jumped to the floor.

"Catch the mouse!" shouted Mama. She picked up a *Fortune* magazine—very big and heavy—and heaved it after Tucker. It hit him on the left hind leg just as he vanished into the drain pipe.

Chester Cricket sat frozen to the spot. He was caught red-handed, holding the chewed-up two dollars in his front legs. Muttering with rage, Mama Bellini picked him up by his antennae, tossed him into the cricket cage, and locked the gate behind him. When she had put the

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newsstand in order, she pulled out her knitting and began to work furiously. But she was so angry she kept dropping stitches, and that made her angrier still.

Chester crouched in a far corner of the cage. Things had been going so well between Mama and him—but that was all ruined now. He half expected that she would pick him up, cage and all, and throw him onto the shuttle tracks.

At eight-thirty Mario and Papa arrived. Mario wanted to go to Coney Island for a swim today, but before he could even say “Good morning,” Mama Bellini stretched out her hand and pointed sternly at Chester. There he was, with the evidence beside him.

A three-cornered conversation began. Mama denounced Chester as a money eater and said further that she suspected him of inviting mice and other unsavory characters into the newsstand at night. Papa said he didn’t think Chester had eaten the two dollars on purpose, and what difference did it make if a mouse or two came in? Mama said he had to go. Papa said he could stay, but he’d have to be kept in the cage. And Mario knew that Chester, like all people who are used to freedom, would rather die than live his life behind bars.

Finally it was decided that since the cricket was Mario’s pet, the boy would have to replace the money.

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And when he had, Chester could come out again. Until then—the cage.

By working part-time delivering groceries, when he wasn't taking care of the newsstand, Mario thought he could earn enough in a couple of weeks to get Chester out of jail. Of course that would mean no swimming at Coney Island, and no movies, and no nothing, but it was worth it. He fed the cricket his breakfast—leftover asparagus tips and a piece of cabbage leaf. Chester had practically no appetite after what had happened. Then, when the cricket was finished, Mario said, "Goodbye," and told him not to worry, and went off to the grocery store to see about his job.

That night, after Papa had shut up the newsstand, Chester was hanging through the gilded bars of his cage. Earlier in the evening Mario had come back to feed him his supper, but then he had to leave right away to get in a few more hours of work. Most of the day Chester had spent inventing hopping games to try to keep himself entertained, but they didn't work, really. He was bored and lonely. The funny thing was that although he had been sleepy and kept wishing it were night, now that it was, he couldn't fall asleep.

Chester heard the soft padding of feet beneath him.

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Harry Cat sprang up and landed on the shelf. In a moment Tucker Mouse followed him from the stool, groaning with pain. He was still limping in his left hind leg where the *Fortune* magazine had hit him.

"How long is the sentence?" asked Harry.

"Until Mario can pay back the money," sighed Chester.

"Couldn't you get out on bail for the time being?" asked Tucker.

"No," said Chester. "And anyway, nobody has any bail. I'm surprised they let me off that easily."

Harry Cat folded his front paws over each other and rested his head on them. "Let me get this straight," he said. "Does Mario have to work for the money as punishment—or does he just have to get it somewhere?"

"He just has to get it," said Chester. "Why should he be punished? I'm the one who ate the money."

Harry looked at Tucker—a long look, as if he expected the mouse to say something. Tucker began to fidget. "Say, Chester, you want to escape?" he asked. "We can open the cage. You could come and live in the drain pipe."

"No." Chester shook his head. "It wouldn't be fair to Mario. I'll just have to serve out the time."

Harry looked at Tucker again and began tapping one of his paws. "Well?" he said finally.

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Tucker moaned and massaged his sore spot. "Oh, my poor leg! That Mama Bellini can sure heave a magazine. Feel the bump, Harry," he offered.

"I felt it already," said Harry. "Now enough of the stalling. You have money."

"Tucker has money?" said Chester Cricket.

Tucker looked nervously from one to the other. "I have my life's savings," he said in a pathetic voice.

"He's the richest mouse in New York," said Harry. "Old Money Bags Mouse, he's known as."

"Now wait a minute, Harry," said Tucker. "Let's not make too much from a few nickels and dimes."

"How did you get money?" asked Chester.

Tucker Mouse cleared his throat and began wringing his two front feet. When he spoke, his voice was all choked up with emotion. "Years ago," he said, "when yet a little mouse I was, tender in age and lacking in experience, I moved from the sweet scenes of my childhood—Tenth Avenue, that is—into the Times Square subway station. And it was here that I learned the value of economicness—which means saving. Many and many an old mouse did I see, crawling away unwanted to a poor mouse's grave, because he had not saved. And I resolved that such a fate would never come to me."

"All of which means that you've got a pile of loot back there in the drain pipe," said Harry Cat.

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"Just a minute, please, if you wouldn't mind," said Tucker. "I'll tell it in my own way." His voice became high and pitiful again. "So for all the long years of my youth, when I could have been gamboling—which means playing—with the other mousies, I saved. I saved paper, I saved food, I saved clothing—"

"Save time and get to the point," said Harry.

Tucker gave Harry a sour smile. "And I also saved money," he went on. "In the course of many years of scrounging, it was only natural I should find a certain amount of loose change. Often—oh, often, my friends," Tucker put his hand over his heart, "would I sit in the opening of my drain pipe, watching the human beings and waiting. And whenever one of them dropped a coin—*however small!*—pennies I love—I would dash out, at great peril to life and limb, and bring it back to my house. Ah, when I think of the tramping shoes and the dangerous galoshes—! Many times have I had my toes stepped on and my whiskers torn off because of these labors. But it was worth it! Oh, it was worth it, my friends, on account of now I have two half dollars, five quarters, two dimes, six nickels, and eighteen pennies tucked away in the drain pipe!"

"Which makes two dollars and ninety-three cents," said Harry Cat, after doing some quick addition.

"And proud I am of it!" said Tucker Mouse.

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"If you've got all that, why did you want to sleep on the two dollar bills in the cricket cage?" asked Chester.

"No folding money yet," said Tucker. "It was a new sensation."

"You can get Chester out and still have ninety-three cents left," said Harry Cat.

"But I'll be ruined," whimpered Tucker. "I'll be wiped out. Who will take care of me in my old age?"

"I will!" said Harry. "Now stop acting like a skinflint and let's get the money."

Chester rang the silver bell to get their attention. "I don't think Tucker should have to give up his life's savings," he said. "It's his money and he can do what he wants with it."

Tucker Mouse poked Harry in the ribs. "Listen to the cricket," he said. "Acting noble and making me look like a bum. Of course I'll give the money! Wherever mice are spoken of, never let it be said that Tucker Mouse was stingy with his worldly goods. Besides, I could think of it as rent I pay for sleeping in the cage."

In order that Tucker could keep at least one of each kind of coin, Harry Cat figured out that they should bring over one half dollar, four quarters, one dime, five nickels, and fifteen cents. That would leave the mouse with a half dollar, a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and three cents.

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"It's not a bad beginning," said Tucker. "I could make up the losses in a year, maybe."

The cat and the mouse had to make several trips back and forth between the drain pipe and the newsstand, carrying the money in their mouths. They passed the coins into the cage one by one, and Chester built them up into a column, starting with the half dollar on the bottom and ending with the dime, which was smallest, on top. It was morning by the time they were finished. They had just time enough to share half a hot dog before Mama Bellini was due to open the stand.

Mario came with her. He wanted to feed Chester early and then work all morning until he took over the newsstand at noon. When they lifted off the cover, Mama almost dropped her end. There was Chester, sitting on top of the column of change, chirping merrily.

Mama's first suspicion was that the cricket had sneaked out and smuggled all the money from the cash register into the cage. But when she looked in the drawer, the money from the night before was still there.

Mario had the idea that Papa might have left it as a surprise. Mama shook her head. She would certainly have known if he had two dollars to leave anybody.

They asked Paul, the conductor, if he'd seen anyone around the newsstand. He said no. The only thing he'd noticed was that that big cat who sometimes prowled



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through the station had seemed to be busier than usual last night. And of course they knew that he couldn't have had anything to do with replacing the money.

But whoever left it, Mama Bellini was true to her word. Chester was allowed out of the cage, and no further questions were asked. Although she wouldn't have admitted it for the world, Mama felt the same way about money that Tucker Mouse did. When you had it, you had it—and you didn't bother too much about where it came from.

NINE

Supper with Mr. Fong

Mario decided that there must be something wrong with Chester's diet if he was eating two-dollar bills. He had been feeding him all the things he liked himself, but now it occurred to him that what was good for a boy might not be right for a cricket. So he made up his mind to take the matter to an expert.

Late one afternoon, when he got off duty at the newsstand, Mario cleaned up the cricket cage, gave Chester a dusting off with a Kleenex, and took him to Chinatown to see Mr. Fong. It was almost seven o'clock when he got there and the shop was closed. He peered through the window and could make out a crack of light under the door to the inner room. And he heard the murmur of two voices talking together in Cantonese.

Mario rapped on the shop door. The light coming

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from the inner room flickered. He rapped again, louder. The inside door opened and Mr. Fong came into the shop, squinting through the half-light. When he saw Mario, his eyes widened and he wiped his hands on his apron. Mr. Fong opened the door. Smells of garlic and onions drifted from the inner room, making his stomach gurgle.

“Cricket boy,” said Mr. Fong.

“Hello, Mr. Fong.” Mario hated to disturb the man during what was clearly his dinnertime, but Mario’s work at the newsstand had made it hard to visit earlier. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I have a problem with my cricket.”

“Very well, come in.”

Mr. Fong led Mario into the next room, which held a small living area with a kitchen. Another man stood by the sink, drying dishes with a dishcloth. He had more white hair than Mr. Fong, and was dressed in a crisp shirt topped with a sweater vest. His expression was serious, like Mario had caught him in the middle of a deep thought.

On a cast-iron stove, a deep, round-bottomed pan simmered with something that made Mario’s mouth begin to water. Plates of steaming food crowded a round table—green leafy vegetables and flat mushrooms in a brown sauce, a plate with a steamed fish with slivers of

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zesty ginger, and a lidded soup tureen. The table had been set with two porcelain bowls painted with peonies, two porcelain spoons to match the bowls, and two pairs of chopsticks.

"This is my older brother," said Mr. Fong, gesturing at the second man. "He is Mr. Fong too, but his students call him Professor."

Mario thought that being a teacher explained the man's stern face, and he felt himself stand up straighter. "Hello, Professor."

"And this is Mario, the boy I was telling you about," said Mr. Fong, nodding his head toward Mario.

"Aha." The professor snapped out his dish towel and folded it into a square. "You are the boy who has my lucky cricket cage."

Chester could feel Mario grip his cage extra tight. Suddenly, the professor's face came closer until Chester could see the man's bright eyes studying him, as if he was asking Chester a question. Chester felt he should say something, so he played a series of chirps.

The professor's face broke into a smile. "Ha! That's not a Black Head General, brother. This cricket is a poet."

Chester liked the sound of that word, "poet." Mario grinned, and that made Chester even happier, so he chirped again.

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"So what seems to be the problem with your cricket?" asked Mr. Fong.

"The problem is," Mario began, "my cricket eats money." And he told them all about the two-dollar bill. "I think I'm not feeding him the right diet."

Mr. Fong nodded, and Mario was glad to be taken seriously.

"What you need is a mulberry tree," said the professor.

Mario was relieved. There were many mulberry trees around New York. Chester would be well fed. Chester was happy too. Mulberry leaves were his favorite.

Mario's stomach chose that moment to let out a growl. Mr. Fong looked at his brother, and the professor shrugged.

"You know what else crickets like?" asked Mr. Fong with a smile.

"No, what?" asked Mario.

"Chinese food. Would you like to join us for dinner?"

The professor clicked his tongue. "Mario's mother might be expecting him."

"She's not," said Mario a little too quickly. He had eaten chop suey before, but nothing as splendid as this. Mama knew he was in Chinatown and would save him a plate, but he could eat that for lunch tomorrow.

Mr. Fong removed a folding chair from a broom

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closet and handed it to Mario, indicating that Mario should place it between the other two chairs. Setting the cricket cage on the table, Mario unfolded his chair while Mr. Fong brought him another bowl, spoon, chopsticks, and even a saucer for Chester. Using a special clamp, the professor lifted a ceramic dish from the round-bottomed pan and added it to the ones already on the table.

"Be careful," said the professor. "This dish has been steaming in the wok."

Mr. Fong rubbed his hands together. "Black bean spareribs. My favorite."

Mario could hardly wait to try black bean spareribs. But the professor lifted the lid off the tureen. "Soup first."

With a ladle, the man spooned a clear soup with watercress into each bowl. Chester got a bit of watercress on his saucer as well.

"Egg drop soup for health," said the professor.

The broth had just the right amount of salt and was streaked with egg, and Mario drank every drop. Chester ate his watercress in satisfying snips.

The professor used a wooden paddle to spoon rice into each of their emptied bowls. "Do you know how to use chopsticks?" he asked Mario.

"No."

Mr. Fong showed Mario how to work the two long sticks to pick up the food, though the chopsticks kept

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slipping out of Mario's fingers. It was much easier to bring the bowl to his mouth and scoop in the food, which the men were doing as well. Mario bit into a chunk of the spareribs. The meat was tender and juicy and full of garlicky flavors. The steamed fish melted in his mouth.

"Try the bok choy and black mushrooms," said the professor, placing a thick and glossy black morsel into his mouth. Though Mario did not usually like mushrooms, these were too interesting to pass up, especially with the professor making contented sounds as he chewed. The mushroom tasted savory and rich, especially with a mouthful of rice.

Chester got a helping of each dish as well. He had never tasted anything so good! In particular, he liked the bok choy, because vegetables were his favorite. He was in leafy green heaven. Every so often, he would have to stop eating and chirp for joy.

The professor nodded at the cricket. "My Black Head General had a good chirp too, but his talent was his strong jaws."

Mr. Fong watched the professor help himself to another serving of spareribs. "Just as your talent is your strong jaws."

Mario laughed, and the professor raised an eyebrow at him. "What is your talent, Mario?"

Mario stopped chewing as he tried to think of what

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his talent was. He was good at adding and subtracting, and he also had a good sense of direction. But were those talents?

Mr. Fong could see the wheels spinning in Mario's head. "Sometimes a grain takes time to shed its husk. That means, talents don't always show themselves until later."

When the four of them had eaten as much of the food as they wanted, Mr. Fong sliced wedges of oranges for dessert. Chester was so full, he wondered if he would be able to hop again.

After Mario had sucked the last bit of sweet juice from the rind, Mr. Fong announced, "Time for some erhu."

Mario wondered if this was another dish. But Mr. Fong ducked back into the shop, and when he returned, he was carrying one of the instruments Mario had seen in the window, the one that had resembled a ship's mast.

"Chinese violin," Mr. Fong explained, setting the instrument on his lap. It had a long handle with two strings. Using a bow that was connected to the handle, Mr. Fong began to play a beautiful melody that neither Mario nor Chester had ever heard before. It made Mario feel like he was visiting another country, and he wished his parents could be here to visit it too. He was reminded of Mr. Smedley's story about the great musician Orpheus, whose harp playing made the whole world stop to listen.

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Between the feast and Mr. Fong's stirring melody, Chester was feeling so contented that he began to chirp. The music reminded him of his running brook back in Connecticut, and he felt just a tiny bit homesick. The professor leaned back in his chair and folded his hands atop his belly. Closing his eyes, his face relaxed into a smile. Mario wished he could keep this moment in his head forever. He had been troubled when he came here, but now, he felt so peaceful, he might just sing as well.

TEN

The Dinner Party

Late one night Chester Cricket was very busy inside the newsstand. As soon as the Bellinis went home, he hopped out of the matchbox and began to clean up. First he pushed in the box so its sides were even and then slid it over beside the alarm clock. Next he pulled a piece of Kleenex out of the Kleenex box and dragged it back and forth across the shelf. When the shelf was dusted, he picked up the tissue in his two front legs and polished the cricket cage so its bars shone. He wiped off the glass in the front of the alarm clock and the radio too until he could see his own reflection. The dial of the clock was luminous and it shed a very soft green light. Chester wanted everything to be perfect on this particular evening. There was going to be a party.

It was exactly two months since Chester had arrived

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in New York, and the three animals wanted to celebrate the anniversary. Nothing too formal, you understand—just a little dinner for everyone. Tucker Mouse had volunteered to let them use the drain pipe, but Chester didn't want to eat amid all the waste paper and rubbish his friend had collected. So after many conferences, they resolved on the newsstand. It was sheltered, and quite big enough, and the radio could provide nice background music.

Tucker Mouse jumped up beside Chester. "How is the food coming, Tucker?" asked the cricket. Tucker had been put in charge of refreshments.

"Hic hic hic," laughed Tucker Mouse, rubbing his front feet together, "wait till I tell you." He lifted up one foot. "I have: two chunks liverwurst, one slice ham, three pieces bacon—from a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich—some lettuce and tomato—from said sandwich—whole-wheat, rye, and white crusts, a big gob cole slaw, two squares from a Hershey chocolate bar, the end of an Oh! Henry candy bar—*with* nuts!—and now comes the climax." Tucker paused. "*Iced* soft drinks!"

"How did you get the ice?" asked Chester.

"Wait, I'll tell you," said Tucker. "All day I've been hiding by the lunch counter. When the soda jerks made a Coke I grabbed the ice they spilled, which I then took to the drain pipe. There," he went on with especial pride,

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"it happens I have a heatproof, insulated bag saved up for just such an occasion. I put in the ice, shut up the opening—we have ice! Nice, eh?"

He sat back on his haunches and grinned at Chester.

"Very nice," said Chester. "Where have you got the drinks?"

"In paper cups," said Tucker. "And no mixing of drinks either. For each kind of soft drink—another cup."

"That's wonderful," said the cricket with admiration.

"Oh, it's nothing really," said Tucker, waving a foot. "I mean, it's something—but nothing too much." He looked around at the shelf and clock and everything. "You are to be congratulated on the cleanliness. Of course, it isn't as important as food-getting, but to be clean is very nice too."

While they were talking, Harry Cat came in through the opening at the side of the newsstand. Chester hopped down, like a good host, to greet his new guest.

"How was the concert?" he asked. Harry had been down to Washington Square to hear an open-air concert of chamber music. How you could play chamber music outdoors Chester didn't understand—but it was New York and anything could happen.

"Very good," answered Harry. "But I don't think the violinist played nearly as well as you do."

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It made Chester very happy to hear that, but he had to turn away so Harry wouldn't see him blush.

"Harry, help me with the food," said Tucker. He jumped down to the floor and scurried over to the drain pipe.

The mouse and the cat put all the different courses over to one side with the soft drinks so everyone could just go up and help himself. It was buffet style. Tucker and Chester sat on the shelf and Harry, who was taller, sat on the stool. But his head was on a level with theirs.

Tucker Mouse took great pride in cooling the soft drinks. There were four cups, one with Coca-Cola, one with Pepsi, one root beer, and the last orange pop. Tucker put a big piece of ice in each and then made a show of stirring them up with a straw he had found that afternoon.

"Ah," he sighed. "Where but in New York could a mouse have ice in his Coca-Cola?"

"We should have music," said Harry. He reached over and flicked on the radio.

First they got a news report. But that wouldn't do for a party. Harry twisted the dial and went through a quiz show, an amateur hour, and a play about the Deep South before he got what he wanted. Music is very nice for a party because it gives you time to eat your fill without having to make conversation.

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Harry Cat was working on his second piece of Oh! Henry candy bar when he suddenly stopped munching and listened to the tune the radio was playing. His head began to sway from side to side.

"That's my favorite song," he said, beginning to hum along with it.

"Sing it, Harry," said Chester Cricket.

"You don't know what you're letting yourself in for," blurted out Tucker Mouse through a mouthful of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich.

But Harry was in a party mood, so he cleared his throat and began:

"When I'm calling youuuuuuuuu

Oooo-oooo-oooo

Oooo-oooo-oooo—"

Harry had a delightful yowl that went very well with the lyrics of the song.

"You see what I told you?" groaned Tucker.

Harry went right on, however:

"Will you answer truuuuuuu

Oooo-oooo-oooo

Oooo-oooo-oooo?"

"Maybe we should turn back to the amateur hour," said Tucker Mouse, helping himself to the Hershey bar.

"I think Harry sings beautifully," said Chester.

"You sing now, Chester," said Harry Cat.



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Secretly the cricket was very anxious to perform for them, but he had to have some encouragement first. He limbered his wings and said, "It's not really singing, you know—"

"Singing, playing—who cares, as long as it doesn't sound like Harry," said Tucker Mouse. He slurped up the last of the orange soda and they all fell silent.

It was well along in August by now, and just the time of the year that crickets all over the world like most. Chester hadn't done nearly as much chirping as usual this summer because he was living in New York, but tonight he played to his heart's content. He thought of his meadow and the stump, the brook and the old willow tree. The song swelled up from his wings and filled the newsstand.

When it was over, Tucker and Harry applauded and congratulated Chester. "Now play us something we know," suggested Harry Cat.

"Well, I don't know if I can," said Chester. "All my songs are my own compositions."

"Listen to the radio and play what it does," said Harry. He turned up the music. "This is the 'Blue Danube' waltz."

Chester cocked his head to one side. The unfamiliar melody made Chester feel he was in a gently swaying boat. When he had heard enough to memorize the

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melody, Chester joined in. And he played it perfectly! The cricket was such a natural musician that he not only chirped the tune—in a few minutes he was making up variations and spinning them out without ever losing the rhythm of the waltz. He found that by tilting his wings he could make the notes go higher or lower, just as he wanted.

Chester got an ovation from his friends. Harry Cat, who had crept into the Metropolitan Opera House a few times and knew how people acted there, shouted, “Bravo, Chester! Bravo!” Of course after such a sample of his talent for imitating songs, his friends insisted that he keep on. And Chester was happy to oblige. There’s nothing like a good audience to encourage a performer.

The next selection from the radio was a group of Italian folk songs. These reminded Chester of the clip-clop of prancing horses, and after picking out the melodies, he chirped them along with the orchestra. After the folk songs came a group of operatic arias, which sounded as lovely as the rustling of maple leaves. It was easier for Chester to play the ones written for tenors than the ones for sopranos, contraltos, and basses, but he did them all beautifully.

Each time he stopped after singing a new piece, the animals shouted, “More! More! More!” So Chester went right on. Now came a South American rumba.

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The rhythm was tricky and it took the cricket a few minutes to catch on to it, but once he had it, he never lost the beat. Chirping away, he sounded like a pair of lively claves.

"Imagine!" exclaimed Tucker Mouse, "he plays pop as well as classical."

Tucker was feeling very lively himself because of all the soda water he had swallowed. The South American tempo began to excite him. He jumped up and started to dance around the shelf.

Harry Cat burst out laughing, but that didn't bother Tucker. He was a carefree soul. "Chester can play—I can dance," he panted. "We should go into vaudeville."

"If you danced as well as he played, you could," said Harry.

"So I'm just learning," said Tucker, and threw himself into a wild twirl next to Papa Bellini's pipe.

He couldn't see where he was going and he toppled over into the box of kitchen matches. The box flipped over. A shower of matches fell around the shelf and onto the cement floor. There were several yellow bursts and the sharp scratch that a match makes when it's lit. Most of them fell far enough away from the wooden walls so they could burn themselves out without danger. But one match, unluckily, struck right next to a pile of that morning's newspapers. The spurt of flames it sent up lit the

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frayed edge of the papers and quickly spread over the whole bundle.

"Watch out!" shouted Chester. Harry Cat leaped up to the shelf just in time to keep his tail from being burned. The cricket was the first to realize what had happened—and what was likely to happen if they didn't put the fire out. "Get the Coca-Cola," he said. "Pour it over."

"I drank it all," shouted Tucker.

"You would!" said Chester. "Is there any ice?"

Harry and Tucker dumped what was left in the insulated bag down on the flames. But it wasn't enough. The fire sputtered, died down, and then flared up again, larger than ever.

"Maybe we can smother it," said Harry.

There was a pile of magazines on the very edge of the shelf, just above the fire. Harry strained and pushed and succeeded in toppling them over. They all peered over the edge to see if the fire was out.

"Oh fine!" said Tucker. "She's still burning and you blocked the hole to get out!"

They were trapped. Harry and Tucker jumped down and started pulling away the magazines furiously. But the fire crept closer and they had to back away.

"What a way to go," said Tucker. "I should have stayed on Tenth Avenue."

For a moment Chester got panicky. But he forced his



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thoughts back into order and took stock of the situation. And an idea struck him. In one leap he jumped onto the alarm clock, landing right on the button that set off the alarm. The old clock began ringing so wildly it shook itself around the shelf in a mad dance. Chester hopped back to his friends.

"Any alarm in a fire," he said.

They waited, crouched against the wall. On the opposite side of the stand the flames were lapping against the wood. Already the paint on it had begun to blister.

Chester could hear voices outside the newsstand. Even at this hour there were always a few people in the station. Somebody said, "What's that?"

"I smell smoke," said another. Chester recognized the voice. It was Paul, the conductor on the shuttle. There was a sound of footsteps running away, then running back again, and a hammering began. The newsstand shook all over.

"Somebody get the other side," said Paul.

The cover was wrenched off. Clouds of smoke billowed up. The people standing around were astonished to see, through the fumes and glare of the fire, a cat, a mouse, and a cricket, running, jumping, to safety.

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From the drain pipe the animals watched Paul put out the fire. He dragged what papers he could out of the newsstand and got a bucket of water to douse the rest. And he watered down the walls to make sure they wouldn't flare up later. When the danger was over, he called up Papa Bellini on the telephone.

"What a mess," said Tucker Mouse, looking at the soggy, smoldering piles of papers and magazines.

No one knew what to say.

"What are you going to do, Chester?" said Harry Cat finally.

"I'm going back there," said Chester. "If the Bellinis find me gone, they'll think I set the fire and ran."

"What makes you think they won't think you set the fire and stayed?" said Tucker.

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"I'll have to take that chance," said Chester. Before the cat or the mouse could say anything to stop him, he hopped over to the newsstand.

Paul had told the engineer that he would miss a few trips on the shuttle and was waiting for the Bellinis. He didn't want anyone monkeying with the cash register while the cover was off. The conductor thought that the cups and bags from the animals' party had been left by Mario or Papa. While he was taking them over to a trash barrel, Chester jumped up on the shelf. Nothing there had been burned, but there was a smoky smell to everything. The cricket took a downhearted leap into the cage and settled himself for whatever might come.

It didn't take the Bellinis long to arrive. They had taken a taxi. And when the Bellinis took a taxi, you could be sure it was an emergency. Chester could hear them hurrying down the steps from the street. Papa was trying to soothe Mama, who was wheezing heavily from asthma and excitement. When she saw the heaps of scorched magazines and newspapers, she began to moan and shake her head. Papa eased her down onto the stool, but it was still covered with water and she stood up again with a wet spot on her skirt.

"Ruin—we're ruined," she sobbed. "Everything's burned."

Papa comforted her as best he could by saying that it

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was only a few stacks of the *Ladies' Home Journal* that had been lost. But Mama wouldn't believe that anything less than complete destruction had come to them all.

Mario, who brought up the rear of this sad parade, thought first for the safety of his cricket. He saw that Chester was in his cage, though, and decided that it would be best to keep quiet until Mama's outburst of grief had subsided.

Paul told them what had happened: how he smelled smoke and heard the alarm clock ringing. Then he came to the part about the animals who had escaped from the burning newsstand.

"So—!" said Mama Bellini, all her despair changing into anger. "Animals in the newsstand again! Didn't I tell you?" She lifted her forefinger at Mario. "Didn't I say the cricketer would ask in his pals? He probably set the fire. He's a firebug!"

Mario didn't have a chance to speak. He would open his mouth to defend Chester, but before he could say a thing, the words were drowned in Mama's flood of reproaches. She had found someone on whom she could blame her unhappiness and there was no stopping her.

When a pause came, Mario said meekly, "My cricket would never do anything like burn up our newsstand."

"The fact remains," said Mama, "we had a fire!"

"But crickets are good luck—" Mario began.

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“Good luck!” said Mama indignantly. “He eats money—he commits arson! He’s a jinx, that’s what. He’s good luck going backwards. And he’s got to go.” She folded her arms across her chest. It was an attitude that Mario knew meant the absolute end of everything.

“I could keep him somewhere else,” the boy offered.

“No,” said Mama, shaking her head as firmly as a door being closed. “He’s a jinx. He goes.”

Papa put his finger to his lips as a signal that Mario shouldn’t say anything more and the two of them began to clean up. They carted away all the hopelessly burned magazines and tried to salvage some that had only been scorched. Mario mopped the floor of the newsstand while Mama spread out papers to dry. By the time they were finished, it was almost the hour for the first wave of commuters.

Chester was lying on the floor of the cricket cage. He felt guilty, because even if he hadn’t set it, in a way the fire was his fault. If he hadn’t invited everyone into the newsstand, it wouldn’t have happened. And it was his playing of the rumba that had made Tucker want to dance, and so tip over the matches. And he did eat the two-dollar bill. He began to believe that he really was a jinx.

During the early-morning rush hour Mario was especially eager in his shouts of “Paper, mister,” and “*Time* or

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Life, mister.” Papa was more active than usual too. But Mama sat glumly on the stool with a gray, determined look on her face. Despite the fact that the selling that morning went very well, she wouldn’t change her mind. After the rush was over, Papa went out to buy a new lock.

Chester heard a soft scratching from behind the Kleenex box. A familiar face peeked out. “What’s going on?” whispered Tucker Mouse.

“You shouldn’t be here!” said Chester under his breath. “They might catch you.”

“I had to find out how you were doing,” said Tucker.

“They’re going to throw me out,” sighed Chester.

“Oh oh oh,” Tucker moaned. “And it was me that did it. Supposing I give you the rest of my life’s savings. Maybe we could buy them off.”

Chester leaned his black little head up against the bars of the cricket cage. “Not this time,” he said. “Mama’s got her mind made up. I don’t blame her either. I wish I’d never come to New York.”

“Oh, Chester,” wailed Tucker Mouse, “don’t say that! You’ll make me feel like a rat. And I’m only a mouse.”

“It’s not your fault, Tucker,” said Chester. “But I’ve been nothing but bad luck to them since I came.”

Without knowing what he was doing, the cricket began to chirp to ease his feelings. He found that it helped somehow if you sang your sadness. He wasn’t paying

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much attention and just by accident he played the first few notes of an Italian folk song he had heard the night before. It was so melancholy, and yet so sweet, that it fitted his mood exactly.

Mama Bellini was untying a bundle of *Herald Tribunes* when she heard the chirping. At first she didn't know what it was. "*Che cos'è questa?*" she said in Italian, which means, "What's that?"

Chester stopped playing.

"*Chi cantava?*" said Mama. "Who was singing?"

Mario looked at his mother. Usually when she spoke in Italian it meant that she was in a good mood. But that couldn't be true today.

Now Tucker Mouse was a very good judge of character—both animal and human. He thought he heard a kind of softness in Mama Bellini's voice. "Play some more," he whispered to Chester.

"She hates me," said Chester. "It'll only make her more angry."

"Do as I tell you!" commanded the mouse urgently.

So Chester started to chirp again. He was in such disgrace anyway, what difference could it make? The piece he was playing was called "Come Back to Sorrento," and by the greatest good luck, it happened to be Mama Bellini's favorite song. Back in Naples, Italy, when Papa was courting her before they came to America, he used to

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come beneath her window on a moonlit night and sing this ballad to the plunking of an old guitar. As the cricket chirped, the whole scene came back to Mama: the still, warm night, the moon shining down on the velvety Bay of Naples, and Papa singing to her. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought of the bygone times, and very softly she began to murmur the words to the song.

Chester Cricket had never played with so much skill before. When he heard Mama singing, he slowed his tempo so she could keep up without straining. When she was loud, he was too—and then softer when she got choked up with emotion and her voice dwindled. But always his chirping carried her along, keeping her on the right beat and the right tune. He was the perfect accompanist.

Mario was dumbfounded. He stared astonished at the cricket cage and then at his mother. It was just as marvelous for his mother to be singing as it was for a cricket to chirp familiar songs. Sometimes, when she was very happy, Mama Bellini whistled, and once or twice Mario had heard her hum. But now here she was crying and warbling like an Italian nightingale!

Chester finished "Come Back to Sorrento."

"Keep it up! Keep it up!" squeaked Tucker Mouse. "She's a sucker for sad songs."

Before Mama's mood had a chance to wear off,



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Chester began chirping the selections from opera that he had played during the party. Mama didn't know the words to the operas, but she hummed some of the tunes along with him. Mario was as still as stone.

Papa Bellini came back from the locksmith's. Coming down the stairs he was surprised not to hear his wife and Mario calling out the newspapers. But when he got nearer the newsstand, he was even more surprised to hear the strains of the Grand March from *Aida* coming from the cricket cage.

"He chirps *opera*?!" exclaimed Papa. His eyes looked as big and startled as two hard-boiled eggs.

"Shhhh," said Mama with a wave of her hand.

Chester's memory for music was perfect. He had to hear a piece only once to remember it forever. When he had finished all the operatic numbers, he stopped. "Should I go on with the pop tunes?" he whispered to Tucker Mouse, who was still hidden behind the Kleenex box.

"Wait a while," said Tucker. "See what happens."

Mama Bellini had a dreamy look in her eyes. She put her arm around her son and said, "Mario, no cricketer who sings '*Torna a Surriento*' so beautifully could possibly start a fire. He can stay a while longer."

Mario threw his arms around his mother's neck.

"You hear? You hear?" squealed Tucker Mouse.

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“You can stay! Oh boy oh boy oh boy! And this is only the beginning. I’ll be your manager—okay?”

“Okay,” said Chester.

And so began the most remarkable week in Chester Cricket’s—or any cricket’s—life.