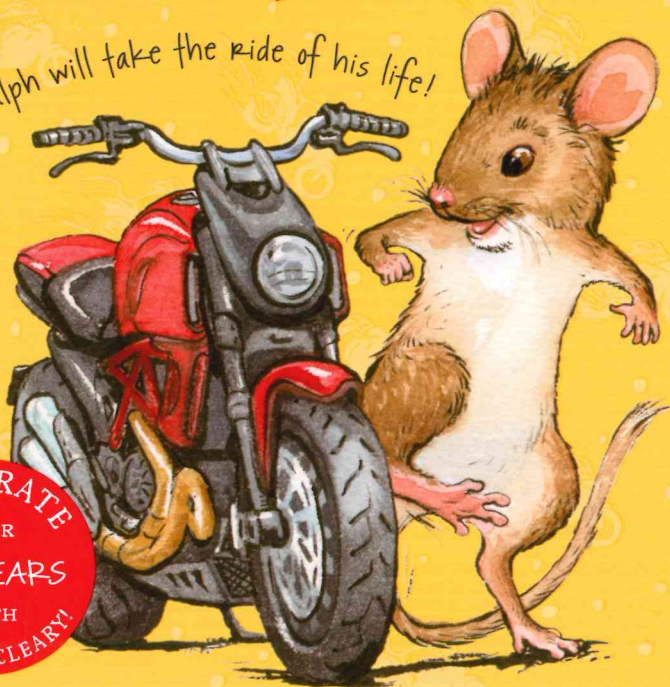


BEVERLY CLEARY

THE MOUSE AND THE MOTORCYCLE

Ralph will take the ride of his life!



CELEBRATE
OVER
60 YEARS
WITH
BEVERLY CLEARY!

CONTENTS

1. THE NEW GUESTS 1
2. THE MOTORCYCLE 11
3. TRAPPED! 22
4. KEITH 30
5. ADVENTURE IN THE NIGHT 46
6. A PEANUT BUTTER SANDWICH 64
7. THE VACUUM CLEANER 78
8. A FAMILY REUNION 93
9. RALPH TAKES COMMAND 104
10. AN ANXIOUS NIGHT 118
11. THE SEARCH 135
12. AN ERRAND OF MERCY 148
13. A SUBJECT FOR A COMPOSITION 162

1

THE NEW GUESTS

Keith, the boy in the rumpled shorts and shirt, did not know he was being watched as he entered Room 215 of the Mountain View Inn. Neither did his mother and father, who both looked hot and tired. They had come from Ohio and for five days had driven across plains and deserts and over mountains to the old hotel in the California foothills twenty-five miles from Highway 40.



The fourth person entering Room 215 may have known he was being watched, but he did not care. He was Matt, sixty if he was a day, who at the moment was the bellboy. Matt also replaced worn-out light-bulbs, renewed washers in leaky faucets, carried trays for people who telephoned room service to order food sent to their rooms, and sometimes prevented children

from hitting one another with croquet mallets on the lawn behind the hotel.

Now Matt's right shoulder sagged with the weight of one of the bags he was carrying. "Here you are, Mr. Gridley. Rooms 215 and 216," he said, setting the smaller of the bags on a luggage rack at the foot of the double bed before he opened a door into the next room. "I expect you and Mrs. Gridley will want Room 216. It is a corner room with twin beds and a private bath." He carried the heavy bag into the next room, where he could be heard opening windows. Outside a chipmunk chattered in a pine tree and a chickadee whistled *fee-bee-bee*.

The boy's mother looked critically around Room 215 and whispered, "I think we should drive back to the main highway. There must be a motel with a *Vacancy* sign someplace. We didn't look long enough."

"Not another mile," answered the father. "I'm not driving another mile on a California highway on a holiday weekend. Did you see the way that truck almost forced us off the road?"

"Dad, did you see those two fellows on motorcycles—" began the boy and stopped, realizing he should not interrupt an argument.

"But this place is so *old*," protested the boy's mother. "And we have only three weeks for our whole trip. We had planned to spend the Fourth of July weekend in San Francisco and we wanted to show Keith as much of the United States as we could."

"San Francisco will have to wait, and this is part of the United States. Besides, this used to be a very fashionable hotel," said Mr. Gridley. "People came from miles around."

"Fifty years ago," said Mrs. Gridley. "And they came by horse and buggy."

The bellboy returned to Room 215. "The dining room opens at six-thirty, sir. There is Ping-Pong in the game room, TV in the lobby, and croquet on the back lawn. I'm sure you will be very comfortable." Matt, who had seen guests come and go for many years, knew there were two kinds—those who thought the hotel was a dreadful old barn of a place and those who thought it charming and quaint, so quiet and restful.

"Of course we will be comfortable," said Mr. Gridley, dropping some coins into Matt's hand for carrying the bags.

"But this big old hotel is positively spooky." Mrs. Gridley made one last protest. "It is probably full of mice."

Matt opened the window wide. "Mice? Oh no, ma'am. The management wouldn't stand for mice."

"I wouldn't mind a few mice," the boy said, as he looked around the room at the

high ceiling, the knotty pine walls, the carpet so threadbare that many of its roses had almost entirely faded, the one chair with the antimacassar on its back, the washbasin and towel racks in the corner of the room. "I like it here," he announced. "A whole room to myself. Usually I just get a cot in the corner of a motel room."

His mother smiled, relenting. Then she turned to Matt. "I'm sorry. It's just that it was so hot crossing Nevada and we are not used to mountain driving. Back on the highway the traffic was bumper to bumper. I'm sure we shall be very comfortable."

After Matt had gone, closing the door behind him, Mr. Gridley said, "I need a rest before dinner. Four hundred miles of driving and that mountain traffic! It was too much."

"And if we are going to stay for a weekend I had better unpack," said Mrs. Gridley. "At least I'll have a chance to do some drip-drying."

Alone in Room 215 and unaware that he was being watched, the boy began to explore. He got down on his hands and knees and looked under the bed. He leaned out the open window as far as he could and greedily inhaled deep breaths of pine-scented air. He turned the hot and cold water on and off in the washbasin and slipped one of the small bars of paper-wrapped soap into his pocket. Under the window he discovered a knothole in the pine wall down by the floor and, squatting, poked his finger into the hole. When he felt nothing inside he lost interest.

Next Keith opened his suitcase and took out an apple and several small cars—a sedan, a sports car, and an ambulance about six inches long, and a red motorcycle half the length of the cars—which he dropped on the striped bedspread before he bit into the apple. He ate the apple noisily in big chomping bites, and then laid the core on

the bedside table between the lamp and the telephone.

Keith began to play, running his cars up and down the bedspread, pretending that the stripes on the spread were highways and making noises with his mouth—*vroom vroom* for the sports car, *wh-e-e wh-e-e* for the ambulance, and *pb-pb-b-b-b* for the motorcycle, up and down the stripes.

Once Keith stopped suddenly and looked quickly around the room as if he expected to see something or someone, but when he saw nothing unusual he returned to his cars. *Vroom vroom. Bang! Crash!* The sports car hit the sedan and rolled over off the highway stripe. *Pb-pb-b-b-b.* The motorcycle came roaring to the scene of the crash.

"Keith," his mother called from the next room. "Time to get washed for dinner."

"OK." Keith parked his cars in a straight line on the bedside table beside the



telephone, where they looked like a row of real cars only much, much smaller.

The first thing Mrs. Gridley noticed when she and Mr. Gridley came into the room was the apple core on the table. She dropped it with a thunk into the metal

wastebasket beside the table as she gave several quick little sniffs of the air and said, looking perplexed, "I don't care what the bellboy said. I'm sure this hotel has mice."

"I hope so," muttered Keith.

2

THE MOTORCYCLE

Except for one terrifying moment when the boy had poked his finger through the mousehole, a hungry young mouse named Ralph eagerly watched everything that went on in Room 215. At first he was disappointed at the size of the boy who was to occupy the room. A little child, preferably two or even three children, would have been better. Little messy children were

always considerate about leaving crumbs on the carpet. Oh well, at least these people did not have a dog. If there was one thing Ralph disliked, it was a snoopy dog.

Next Ralph felt hopeful. Medium-sized boys could almost always be counted on to leave a sticky candy bar wrapper on the floor or a bag of peanuts on the bedside table, where Ralph could reach them by climbing up the telephone cord. With a boy this size, the food, though not apt to be plentiful, was almost sure to be of good quality.

The third emotion felt by Ralph was joy when the boy laid the apple core by the telephone. This was followed by despair when the mother dropped the core into the metal wastebasket. Ralph knew that anything at the bottom of a metal wastebasket was lost to a mouse forever.

A mouse lives not by crumbs alone and so Ralph experienced still another emotion;

this time food was not the cause of it. Ralph was eager, excited, curious, and impatient all at once. The emotion was so strong it made him forget his empty stomach. It was caused by those little cars, especially that motorcycle and the *pb-pb-b-b-b* sound the boy made. That sound seemed to satisfy something within Ralph, as if he had been waiting all his life to hear it.

Pb-pb-b-b-b went the boy. To the mouse the sound spoke of highways and speed, of distance and danger, and whiskers blown back by the wind.

The instant the family left the room to go to dinner, Ralph scurried out of the mousehole and across the threadbare carpet to the telephone cord, which came out of a hole in the floor beside the bedside table.

"Ralph!" scolded his mother from the mousehole. "You stay away from that telephone cord!" Ralph's mother was a

great worrier. She worried because their hotel was old and run-down and because so many rooms were often empty with no careless guests to leave crumbs behind for mice. She worried about the rumor that their hotel was to be torn down when the new highway came through. She worried about her children finding aspirin tablets. Ralph's father had tried to carry an aspirin tablet in his cheek pouch, the aspirin had dissolved with unexpected suddenness, and Ralph's father had been poisoned. Since then no member of the family would think of touching an aspirin tablet, but this did not prevent Ralph's mother from worrying.

Most of all Ralph's mother worried about Ralph. She worried because he was a reckless mouse, who stayed out late in the daytime when he should have been home safe in bed. She worried when Ralph climbed the curtain to sit on the windowsill

to watch the chipmunk in the pine tree outside and the cars in the parking lot below. She worried because Ralph wanted to go exploring down the hall instead of traveling under the floorboards like a sensible mouse. Heaven only knew what dangers he might meet in the hall—maids, bellboys, perhaps even cats. Or what was worse, vacuum cleaners. Ralph's mother had a horror of vacuum cleaners.

Ralph, who was used to his mother's worries, got a good running start and was already halfway up the telephone cord.

"Remember your Uncle Victor!" his mother called after him.

Ralph seemed not to hear. He climbed the cord up to the telephone, jumped down, and ran around to the row of cars. There it was on the end—the motorcycle! Ralph stared at it and then walked over and kicked a tire. Close up the motorcycle looked even

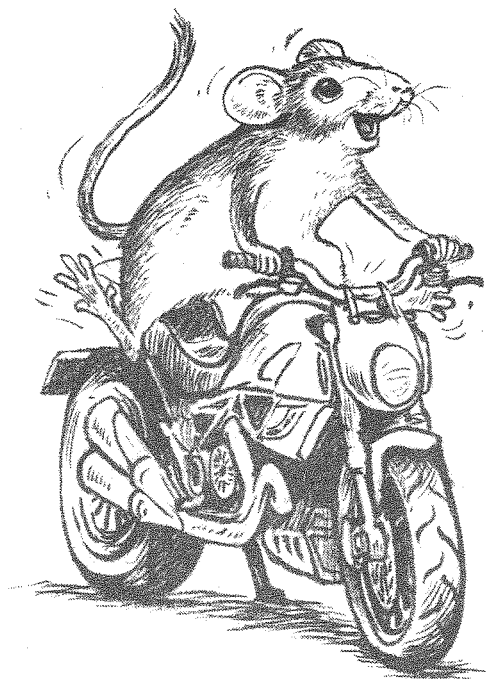
better than he expected. It was new and shiny and had a good set of tires. Ralph walked all the way around it, examining the pair of chromium mufflers and the engine and the hand clutch. It even had a little license plate so it would be legal to ride it.

“Boy!” said Ralph to himself, his whiskers quivering with excitement. “Boy, oh, boy!” Feeling that this was an important moment in his life, he took hold of the handgrips. They felt good and solid beneath his paws. Yes, this motorcycle was a good machine all right. He could tell by the feel. Ralph threw a leg over the motorcycle and sat jauntily on the plastic seat. He even bounced up and down. The seat was curved just right to fit a mouse.

But how to start the motorcycle? Ralph did not know. And even if he did know how to start it, he could not do much riding up here on the bedside table. He considered

pushing the motorcycle off onto the floor, but he did not want to risk damaging such a valuable machine.

Ralph bounced up and down on the seat a couple more times and looked around for some way to start the motorcycle. He pulled at a lever or two but nothing happened. Then a terrible thought spoiled his pleasure. This was only a toy. It would not run at all.



Ralph, who had watched many children in Room 215, had picked up a lot of information about toys. He had seen a boy from Cedar Rapids throw his model airplane on the floor because he could not make its plastic parts fit properly. A little girl had burst into tears and run sobbing to her mother when her doll's arm had come out of its socket. And then there was that nice boy, the potato chip nibbler, who stamped his foot because the batteries kept falling out of his car.

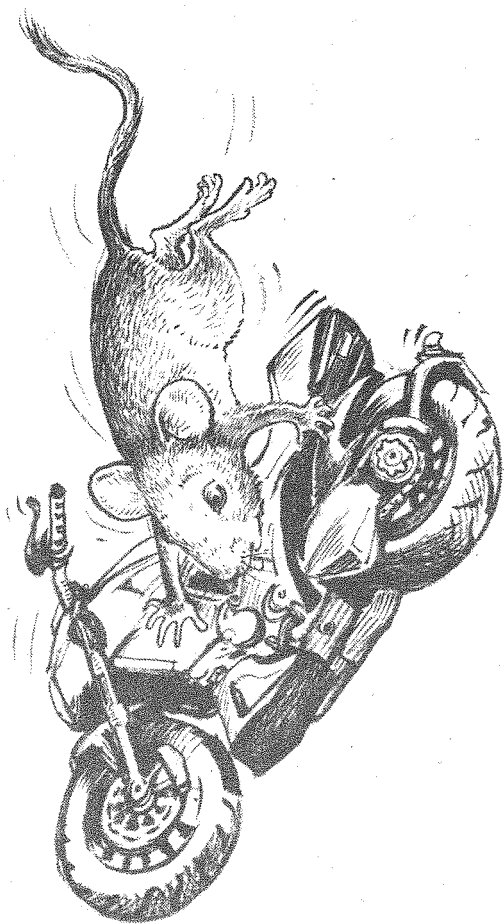
But this toy could not be like all those other toys he had seen. It looked too perfect with its wire spokes in its wheels and its pair of shiny chromium exhaust pipes. It would not be right if it did not run. It would not be *fair*. A motorcycle that looked as real as this one *had* to run. The secret of making it run must be perfectly simple if only Ralph had someone to show him what it was.

Ralph was not satisfied just sitting on the motorcycle. Ralph craved action. After all, what was a motorcycle for if it wasn't action? Who needed motorcycle riding lessons? Not Ralph! He tried pushing himself along with his feet. This was not nearly fast enough, but it was better than nothing. He moved his feet faster along the tabletop and then lifted them up while he coasted. Feeling braver, he bent low over the handlebars and worked his feet still faster toward the edge of the bedside table. When he worked up a little speed he would coast around the corner. He scrabbled his feet on the tabletop to gain momentum. In a split second he would steer to the left—

At that moment the bell on the telephone rang half a ring, so close that it seemed to pierce the middle of Ralph's bones. It rang just that half ring, as if the girl at the switchboard realized she had rung the wrong

room and had jerked out the cord before the ring was finished.

That half a ring was enough. It shattered Ralph's nerves and terrified him so that he forgot all about steering. It jumbled his



thoughts until he forgot to drag his heels for brakes. He was so terrified he let go of the handgrips. The momentum of the motorcycle carried him forward, over the edge of the table. Down, down through space tumbled Ralph with the motorcycle. He tried to straighten out, to turn the fall into a leap, but the motorcycle got in his way. He grabbed in vain at the air with both paws. There was nothing to clutch, nothing to save him, only the empty air. For a fleeting instant he thought of his poor old Uncle Victor. That was the instant the motorcycle landed with a crash in the metal wastebasket.

Ralph fell in a heap beside the motorcycle and lay still.

3

TRAPPED!

Even though Ralph woke up feeling sick and dizzy, his first thought was of the motorcycle. He hoped it was not broken. He sat there at the bottom of the wastebasket until the whirly feeling in his head stopped and he was able, slowly and carefully, to stand up. He stretched each aching muscle and felt each of his four legs to make certain it was not broken.

When Ralph was sure that he was battered but intact he examined the motor-cycle. He set it upright and rolled it backward and forward to make sure the wheels still worked. One handlebar was bent and some of the paint was chipped off the rear fender, but everything else seemed all right. Ralph hoped so, but there was no way he could find out until he figured out how to start the engine. Now he ached too much even to try.

Wearily Ralph dragged himself over to the wall of his metal prison and sat down beside the apple core to rest his aching body. He leaned back against the side of the wastepaper basket, closed his eyes, and thought about his Uncle Victor. Poor near-sighted Uncle Victor. He, too, had landed in a metal wastepaper basket, jumping there quite by mistake. Unable to climb the sides, he had been trapped until the maid came

and emptied him out with the trash. No one knew for sure what had happened to Uncle Victor, but it was known that trash in the hotel was emptied into an incinerator.

Ralph felt sad and remorseful thinking about his Uncle Victor getting dumped out with the trash. His mother had been right after all. His poor mother, gathering crumbs for his little brothers and sisters while he, selfish mouse that he was, sat trapped in a metal prison from which the only escape was to be thrown away like an old gum wrapper.

Ralph thought sadly of his comfortable home in the mousehole. It was a good home, untidy but comfortable. The children who stayed in Room 215 usually left a good supply of crumbs behind, and there was always water from the shirts hung to drip-dry beside the washbasin. It should have been enough. He should have been content

to stay home without venturing out into the world looking for speed and excitement.

Outside in the hall Ralph heard footsteps and Matt, the bellboy, saying, "These new people in 215 and 216, somehow they got the idea there are mice in the hotel. I just opened the window and told them the management wouldn't stand for it."

Ralph heard a delighted laugh from the second-floor maid, a college girl who was working for the summer season. "Mice are adorable but just the same, I hope I never find any in my rooms. I'm afraid of them." There were two kinds of employees at the Mountain View Inn—the regulars, none of them young, and the summer help, who were college students working during the tourist season.

"If you don't like mice you better stay away from that knothole under the window in Room 215," advised Matt.

The sound of voices so close made Ralph more eager than ever to escape. "No!" he shouted, his voice echoing in the metal chamber. "I won't have it! I'm too young to be dumped out with the trash!"

In spite of his aches he jumped to his feet, ran across the wastebasket floor, and leaped against the wall, only to fall back in a sorry heap. He rose, backed off, and tried again. There he was on the floor of the wastebasket a second time. It was useless, utterly useless. He did not have the strength to tip over the wastebasket.

Ralph was not a mouse to give up easily. He considered his problem a moment before he rolled the motorcycle over to the wall of the wastebasket. Then he seized the apple core by the stem and dragged it over to the motorcycle. By putting his shoulder under the stem end, he managed to raise the core until it was standing on its blossom end, but when he put his front paws around

it and tried to lift it, he found he could not. The core was too heavy to lift up onto the seat of the motorcycle. Ralph was disappointed but when he stopped to think it over, he saw that even if he could manage to get the apple core on top of the motorcycle, it still would not be high enough to allow him to climb out of the wastebasket.

Bruised and defeated, Ralph dropped the core and decided that he might as well be thrown out with the trash on a full stomach as an empty one. He took a bite of apple and felt a little better. It was the best food he had eaten for several days—juicy and full of flavor and much better than the damp zwieback crumbs the last guests had left behind. He took several more bites and settled down to a hearty meal, saving the seeds for dessert.

Two ant scouts appeared on the rim of the wastebasket.

“Go away,” said Ralph crossly, because

he did not like to eat food crawling with ants and because it embarrassed him to be seen in such a predicament. The ants left as silently as they had come.

When Ralph had eaten his fill of the apple he curled up beside the core. He only hoped that someone might happen to drop a Kleenex over him. It was bad enough to be carried to one's doom in a wastebasket, but to be carried to one's doom by a shrieking maid was unthinkable. There was one tiny ray of hope—if someone did happen



to drop a Kleenex over him, he just might have a chance to jump and run when the maid tipped the basket up to empty it into the incinerator.

The thought that the boy was sure to miss his motorcycle and start looking for it kept Ralph tossing and turning behind the apple core until, stuffed and exhausted, he finally fell asleep.

4

KEITH

Ralph did not know how much time had passed before he was awakened by the lamp on the bedside table shining down on him. He squeezed himself into the tiniest possible ball, wrapped his tail around his body, and tried to make himself as thin as the apple core.

“My motorcycle!” shouted the boy the very first thing. “Somebody stole my motorcycle!”

Oh-oh, thought Ralph. It won't be long now.

"Nobody stole your motorcycle," answered the boy's mother from 216. "It's around someplace. You just mislaid it. You can find it in the morning. You had better get ready for bed now."

"No, I didn't mislay it," insisted the boy. "I put it right here on the table beside my sports car."

"You'll find it someplace," said his mother, not much interested. Boys were always losing things.

While Ralph cowered behind the apple core, Keith opened the drawer of the bedside table and slammed it shut. He jerked back the bedspread, yanked the pillows off the bed, and threw them back. Then he got down on his hands and knees and looked under the bed and the table.

Ralph wrapped his tail more tightly around his body. Here it comes, he thought.

The boy's face appeared in the opening at the top of the wastebasket. Ralph's heart raced like a motor.

"Ha," said the boy to himself. "Here it is. I wonder how it got there." His hand came down into the wastebasket to seize the motorcycle and lift it out. Still leaning over the wastebasket, he examined the bent handlebar and the chipped paint. "That's funny," he remarked aloud. "It must have rolled off, but I don't see how it could."

The boy did the natural thing for a boy to do. He looked into the wastebasket again. Ralph closed both eyes tight and waited. He wished he had not eaten so much of the apple core. If he had not been so greedy, the core would have been thicker and he would have been thinner.

"Hey!" whispered the boy, obviously very much surprised. "How did you get in here?" He was careful to keep his voice

lower than the sound of the breezes in the pines outside the window.

Ralph did not move. He was grateful to the boy for not touching the apple core even though it was really no protection at all.

"Psst!" whispered the boy. "Are you asleep?"

Still Ralph remained motionless except for a slight quiver of his whiskers, which he was unable to control. The boy was silent, but the mouse could feel the rhythmic drafts of his breathing. The boy must be thinking, but what was he thinking? That was what was worrying Ralph. "No," said the boy to himself. "No, it couldn't be."

Couldn't be what? wondered Ralph, who was beginning to feel cramped from crouching behind the apple core.

"Hey, wake up," whispered the boy.

That was the last thing Ralph wanted to do.

"Come on," pleaded the boy. "I won't hurt you."

Ralph considered. After all, what did he have to lose? If he stayed in the wastebasket, he was almost certain to get dumped into the incinerator. He might as well come out from behind the core. If he did he might find some opportunity to escape. Cautiously he moved his head from his paws and opened one eye. The boy was smiling down at him. Encouraged, Ralph opened the other eye and lifted his head.

"That's the stuff," encouraged the boy. "Now come on. Tell me, did you or didn't you ride my motorcycle off the bedside table?"

This took Ralph by surprise. He had not expected the boy to guess what happened. "Well, yes. I guess you might say I did," confessed Ralph, rubbing his aching muscles.

"I thought so." Neither the mouse nor

the boy was the least bit surprised that each could understand the other. Two creatures who shared a love for motorcycles naturally spoke the same language. "That must have been some accident. Did it hurt much?"

"Oh, some," answered Ralph with a display of bravado. "Anyway, I didn't exactly ride it. I really coasted off. The telephone rang and startled me. Now how about getting me out of here?"

"Just a minute," said the boy. "How did you get up here in the first place?"

"Climbed, stupid. On the telephone cord." Ralph instantly regretted his rudeness. He had better watch his tongue if he expected any help in escaping from the wastebasket.

"Oh, of course," said the boy apologetically. "I should have thought of that myself."

At that moment there came a quick knock on the door to Room 215 and the rattle of a key.

"Help!" cried Ralph. "The maid! Don't let her see me!"

Before the boy could do anything, the maid burst into the room. "Oh—excuse me." She seemed surprised to see a boy kneeling by the wastebasket. "I've come to turn down the bed."

"That's all right," said the boy quickly. "I can do it myself. Thanks, anyway."

"Thank you," said the maid, backing out of the room. Ralph knew she was not anxious to waste time turning down the bed. As soon as she finished her duties she was going out to the parking lot to meet a bus-boy, a college boy whose job was clearing tables in the dining room.

"Whew! That was close." The boy seemed every bit as relieved as Ralph.

"I'll say," agreed the mouse.

"Keith," called his mother from 216. "Are you getting ready for bed?"

"Sort of," answered Keith.

"You'd better come in our bathroom and take a bath," said his mother.

"Aw, gee, Mom, do I gotta?" asked Keith.

"Yes, you do," said his father.

"And don't forget to brush your teeth," said his mother.

"I won't," promised Keith. Then he whispered to Ralph, "You just lie low. I'll hurry and take a bath and get into bed and turn out the light and after Mom comes and kisses me good night, we can talk some more."

Lie low indeed! Ralph was indignant. He couldn't lie much lower if he wanted to, and he certainly did not want to sit around waiting to talk. He wanted to get out of that wastebasket. Once he was out he would see about talking, but not before.

Ralph could hear the boy splashing in 216's bathtub and then hastily brushing his

teeth in 215's washbasin. After this there was the sound of a suitcase being opened and clothes dropped on the floor. The boy hopped into bed and to Ralph's relief, the light was turned out. In a moment Mrs. Gridley came in to kiss her son good night.

"Night, Mom," said the boy, sounding as if he were already drowsy.

"Good night, Keith," said his mother. "It looks as if we are going to have to stay here for a few days. Your father refuses to budge."

"That's OK," muttered Keith, giving the impression he was almost asleep.

"Good boy," said his mother. "You're a good sport."

"Good night, Son," said the boy's father from the doorway between the two rooms.

Keith did not answer. Instead he breathed slowly and deeply and, as Ralph thought, a bit too noisily. There was no sense in over-doing things.

As soon as all was quiet in the next room, the boy swung his legs out of bed, fumbled around in his suitcase, and shone a flashlight into the wastebasket.

Almost blinded by the unexpected light, Ralph held his paws over his eyes. "Hey, cut that out!" He could not remember to be polite.

"Oh—sorry." The boy laid the flashlight on the bed, where its beam shone across the wastebasket rather than into it.

"That's better," said Ralph. "Now how about getting me out of here?" As an afterthought he added, "Please."

The boy ignored the mouse's request. "How would you like to ride my motorcycle?" he asked.

Ralph's heart skipped a beat like a motor missing on one cylinder. The mouse-sized motorcycle really would run after all! And there was one thing certain. Since the

motorcycle really would run, the boy could not expect him to ride around the bottom of a wastebasket. "Sure." Ralph tried to sound calm. The important thing was to get out of this prison. He braced himself, dreading the touch of the boy's hand on his fur.

To Ralph's surprise, the boy did not reach in and grab him. Instead, he slowly and gently tipped the wastebasket on its side, permitting Ralph to walk to freedom with pride and dignity.

"Thanks," said Ralph, genuinely grateful for this consideration. "I believe you're OK."

"Sure I'm OK," said the boy, setting his motorcycle down beside Ralph. "Did you think I wasn't?"

"You never can tell." Ralph put his paw on the handlebar of the motorcycle. "It's a real beauty. Even with a bent handlebar. I'm sure sorry about that."

"Forget it," said the boy reassuringly. "It

won't hurt much. The motorcycle will still run."

Ralph threw his leg over the motorcycle and settled himself comfortably in the seat.

"Perfect! Just perfect!" The boy was obviously delighted that his motorcycle was just right for a mouse.

Ralph could not have agreed more heartily. It *was* perfect—except for one thing. He did not know how to start it.

"Well, go on," said the boy. "Ride it."

Ralph was ashamed to confess his ignorance. "I don't know how to start it," he admitted. "It's the first motorcycle I have ever had a chance to ride."

"You have to make a noise," the boy explained matter-of-factly. "These cars don't go unless you make a noise."

The answer was so obvious Ralph was disgusted with himself for not knowing without asking. He grasped the handgrips

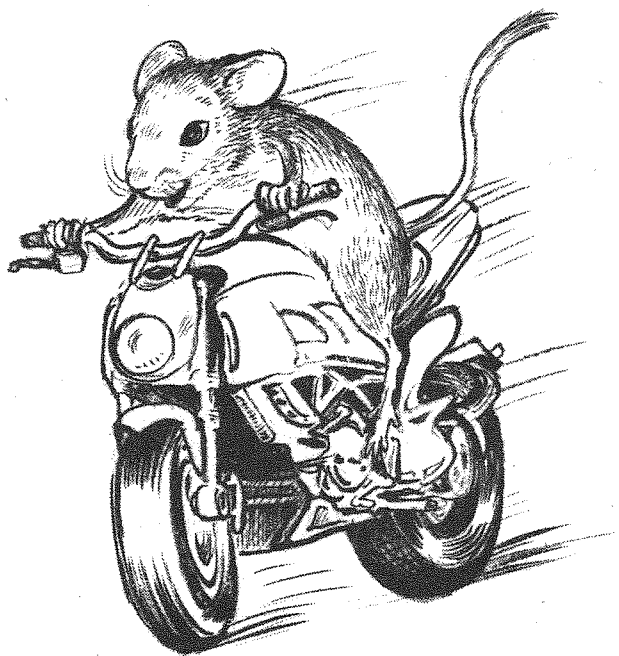
and, fearful lest his noise be too squeaky, managed a *pb-pb-b-b-b*. Sure enough, the motorcycle moved. It really and truly moved across the threadbare carpet. Ralph was so excited that he promptly forgot to make the noise. The motorcycle stopped. Ralph started it again. *Pb-pb-b-b-b*. This time he remembered to keep on making the noise. He sped off into a square of moonlight on the carpet and found a good threadbare spot without any bumps.

“Look out for your tail,” said the boy. “Don’t let it get caught in the spokes.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” said Ralph, causing the motorcycle to stop. He started it again and steered with one paw while he reached back with the other, caught up his tail, and held the tip safely against the handlebar. It was a glorious sensation, speeding around on the carpet, freely and noisily and, most of all, fast. Ralph discovered that if he

made the noise fast, the motorcycle speeded up. If he slowed the sound, the motorcycle slowed down. He promptly speeded up and raced around in the rectangle of moonlight, where he made another discovery. When he ran out of breath, the momentum of the motorcycle carried him on until he could take another breath.

“Gee, you’re lucky,” whispered the boy. In order to answer, Ralph had to stop.



"I am?" It had never occurred to him that a mouse could be luckier than a boy.

"You sure are." The boy spoke with feeling. "My mother would never let me ride a motorcycle. She would say I might break a leg or something silly like that."

"Well, if you want to come right down to it," said Ralph, "I don't suppose my mother would be exactly crazy about the idea." He began to have an uneasy feeling that he really should be getting back to the mousehole.

"Anyway," said the boy gloomily, "it will be years and years before I'm old enough to ride a motorcycle, and then when I am old enough my mother won't let me."

Ralph really felt sorry for the boy, hampered as he was by his youth and his mother.

"Go on, ride it some more," said the boy. "I like to watch."

Pb-pb-b-b-b. Ralph started the motorcycle

again and rode around in the moonlight once more, faster and faster, until he was dizzy from circling, dizzy with excitement, dizzy with the joy of speed. Never mind the danger, never mind what his mother thought. This was living. This was what he wanted to do. On and on and on.

“Lucky,” whispered the boy with envy in his voice.

Ralph did not answer. He did not want to stop.

5

ADVENTURE IN THE NIGHT

When Ralph had mastered riding the motorcycle on the threadbare carpet, he went bumping over the roses on the less worn parts under the dresser and the bedside table. That was fun, too.

“Hey,” whispered the boy. “Come on out where I can see you.”

Pb-pb-b-b-b. Ralph shot out into the moonlight, where he stopped, sitting jauntily on

the motorcycle with one foot resting on the floor. "Say," he said, "how about letting me take her out in the hall? You know, just for a little spin to see how fast she'll go."

"Promise you'll bring it back?" asked Keith.

"Scout's honor," answered Ralph, who had picked up many expressions from children who had stayed in 215.

"OK, I'll tell you what," said Keith. "You can use it at night and I'll use it in the daytime. I'll leave the door open an inch so you can get in. That way you can ride it up and down the hall at night."

"Can I really?" This was more than Ralph had hoped for. "Where do you want me to park it when I come in?" he asked.

"Someplace where the maid won't step on it," answered the boy.

"That's easy. Under the bed. She practically never cleans under the bed."

"Yes, I know," agreed Keith. "I looked. There are a lot of dust mice back there."

"Please—" Ralph was pained.

"Oh. Sorry," said the boy. "That's what my mother calls bunches of dusty fluff under the bed."

"My mother doesn't," said Ralph. "Now how about opening the door?"

The boy put his hand on the doorknob. "You won't let anything happen to my motorcycle, will you?" he asked.

"You know I wouldn't let anything happen to a beauty like this," said Ralph.

"See that you don't. And don't stay out too late." The boy opened the door and permitted Ralph to putt out into the dim light of the hall.

Ralph had a scary feeling he was on the threshold of adventure. There were no beds or chairs for him to dart under in case of danger. The floor creaked. Someone was



snoring in Room 214 across the hall. Outside in the pines an owl hooted, sending prickles up Ralph's spine.

Ralph controlled the trembling of his paws while he hesitated outside the door to consider the possibilities of the hall, which was carpeted down the center, leaving two smooth highways of bare floor on either side along the baseboards. It did not take Ralph long to decide what to do. He picked up his tail, took a deep breath, bent low over the handlebars, flattened his ears, and sped down the straightaway as fast as the motorcycle would go. He could feel his whiskers swept back by the force of his speed. It was glorious!

Ralph had never ventured so far from home before. The old wooden hotel, cooling in the night air, snapped and creaked, but Ralph was brave. He was riding a motorcycle. He passed Room 213, ran out of breath, and

let momentum carry him past another noisy snorer in Room 211, on down the hall to the elevator, the mysterious elevator that carried people to that wonderful place Ralph had heard so much about—the ground floor.

When Ralph came to the stairs he stopped to look down, knowing it was impossible to ride a motorcycle downstairs and at the same time wishing he could see for himself the wonders that lay below. He sniffed the air and it seemed to him that he could smell the strange foods he had heard about—cinnamon buns with sticky frosting, turkey stuffing, and pancakes with maple syrup. A ray of moonlight from a window glinted on the glassy eye of a mounted deer's head over the stair landing and startled Ralph, sending him off down the hall, past the broom closet and the linen room to the end of the hall, where he executed a sharp turn and started back.

Exhilarated by speed, Ralph raced up and down. Once when he heard some people getting out of the elevator he had to duck behind the curtain of the window at the end of the hall. Toward midnight he passed his Aunt Sissy scurrying along the baseboard. He waved and nearly lost control of the motorcycle. Aunt Sissy stopped to stare while Ralph rode on, feeling pleased with himself and at the same time sorry for Aunt Sissy, poor frightened thing with only her feet to carry her from one crumb to the next.

Up and down the hall raced Ralph until, after an especially noisy burst of speed outside Room 211, he was startled to hear a dog bark inside the room.

Now it was Ralph's turn to be frightened. Oh-oh, he thought, I'd better be careful. If there was one thing Ralph disliked, it was people who traveled with dogs.

Dogs always sniffed around where they had no business sniffing. Once a dog had even barked into the mousehole in Room 215. It was days before Ralph's mother got over *that*.

Ralph heard someone moving around inside Room 211 and, looking back over his shoulder, he saw the door open and a tousled man in a bathrobe and slippers appeared carrying a little terrier. The man looked cross and sleepy as he started down the hall toward the elevator with his dog. He was walking straight toward Ralph.

Pb-pb-b-b-b. Realizing he was taking a chance, Ralph speeded up the motorcycle. If he turned and headed back to Room 215 he would have to pass the man. It was better to continue toward the elevator and hope he could find a place to hide. He raced on down the hall.

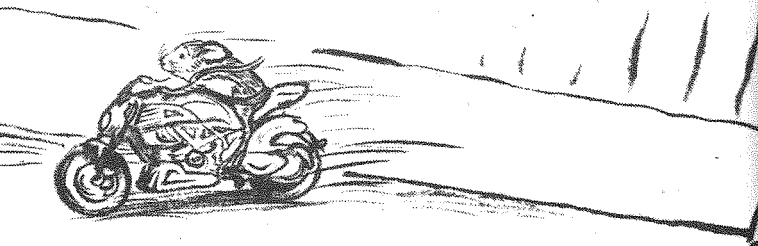
The wild barks of the little terrier told

Ralph that he had been seen by the dog if not by the man.

“Shut up,” muttered the man to his dog. “I’m going to walk you, you don’t have to wake up the whole hotel.”

Ralph reached the elevator, where he drove around behind the ashtray on a stand beside the door. He stopped and waited, tense and frightened. Outside an owl hooted, was silent, and hooted again. A sudden breeze rattled windows and banged a door. Ralph’s teeth began to chatter.

The dog whimpered but the man walked straight past Ralph, pushed a button, and in





a moment stepped into the elevator.

Whew! thought Ralph when the elevator door had closed on the sleepy man and his noisy dog. Maybe he had better lie low for a while. In a few minutes the elevator returned to the second floor. As the man stepped out, the little dog looked over his shoulder and spied Ralph parked behind the ashtray stand.

Because the dog was a captive and he was free, Ralph could not resist sticking out his tongue and wagging his paws in his ears, a gesture he had learned from children in Room 215 and one he knew was sure to arouse anger.

"Let me at him," barked the little terrier.

"Cut it out," grumbled the man, fumbling for the doorknob of Room 211 while Ralph, a daredevil now, rode in a giddy circle around the ashtray stand. He had a feeling of cockiness he had never known

before. Who said mice were timid? Ha!

When the morning song of birds in the pines grew louder than the snores of the guests and dawn slipped through the window at the end of the hall, Ralph knew it was time to return to Room 215. There he was shocked to discover the door shut. Only then did he recall the draft in the night and the slam of a door. He got off the motorcycle and pounded on the door with his fist, but what sleeping boy could hear a mouse beating on a door?

Ralph knew from experience that he could flatten himself out and crawl under the door of Room 215, but there was no way he could get the motorcycle through the crack, not even by laying it on its side and pushing. The handlebars were too wide.

Ralph dismounted from the motorcycle, sat down, and leaned back against the baseboard, prepared to guard the motorcycle

until Keith awoke and discovered the door blown shut. He was tired after a night of such great excitement and full of dreams. Now that he had seen the hall he could no longer be satisfied with Room 215. It was not enough. He longed to see the rest of the world—the dining room and the kitchen and the storeroom and the garbage cans out back. He wanted to see the game room where, he had been told, grown-up people played games with cards and balls and paddles. He wanted to go outdoors and brave the owls to hunt for seeds. Ralph, a growing mouse who needed his rest, dozed off against the baseboard beside the motorcycle. After the experiences of this night, he would never be the same mouse again.

The next thing Ralph knew, Matt the bellboy was standing over him. "Aren't you out pretty late?" Matt asked, causing Ralph to jump to his feet even though he was not

entirely awake. "You should have been in bed long ago, but I suppose you were out till all hours, speeding around on that motorcycle."

Ralph had seen Matt many times, but this was the first time the old man had spoken to him. He was astonished to discover they spoke the same language. Even so, Ralph stood in front of the motorcycle. Anyone who tried to take it away from him would have to fight Ralph first.

"Nice little machine you got there," remarked Matt. "Kind of wish I was young enough to ride one myself. Must be fun, speeding along, making all that noise."

Ralph realized that Matt was a friend. "Say," he began, "how about helping a fellow out?"

"Sure," agreed Matt. "What can I do for you?"

"Open that door a crack. Just enough

so I can ride through. I promised the boy I would park his motorcycle under the bed."

"Good place," said Matt. "The maid never cleans there if she can help it." Very quietly he turned the knob and opened the door just enough for Ralph to ride through.

Ralph bumped up over the edge of the carpet, swung out around the wastebasket and the bedside table, and was about to drive under the bed when—

"E-eek!" screamed the boy's mother, who was standing in the doorway between 215 and 216 in her bathrobe with her hair up on rollers. "A mouse!"

Ralph put on a burst of speed and shot under the bed.

"Where?" asked the boy's father, coming in from Room 216.

"Under the bed."

"I'll look, Mom," said the boy, jumping out of bed.



Keith's face appeared under the lifted edge of the bedspread, where Ralph sat trembling on the motorcycle. The boy held out his hand and beckoned. Ralph understood. He

dismounted and ran up the boy's arm inside the sleeve of his pajamas until he came to the crook of his elbow. There he waited, shivering, to see what would happen next. Down at the end of the sleeve he could see the boy's fingers close around the motorcycle. Then he felt himself being lifted as the boy rose from his hands and knees.

"It's just my motorcycle," Keith said.

"Yes! That's it," agreed his mother. "The door opened and the mouse rode in—"

The boy's father began to laugh. "You are still dreaming."

"But I'm positive—" insisted the boy's mother.

"That you saw a mouse on a little red motorcycle," finished the boy's father, and laughed even harder.

"You make it sound so ridiculous," objected the mother.

"Well?" The father snorted with laughter.

“Well, perhaps I was dreaming,” admitted the mother reluctantly, “but I know I saw a mouse. I’m positive and I am going to report it to the management. I knew the minute we moved into this spooky old place that it had mice.”

Now I’ve done it, thought Ralph inside the pajama sleeve.

6

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 day-dreams 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.

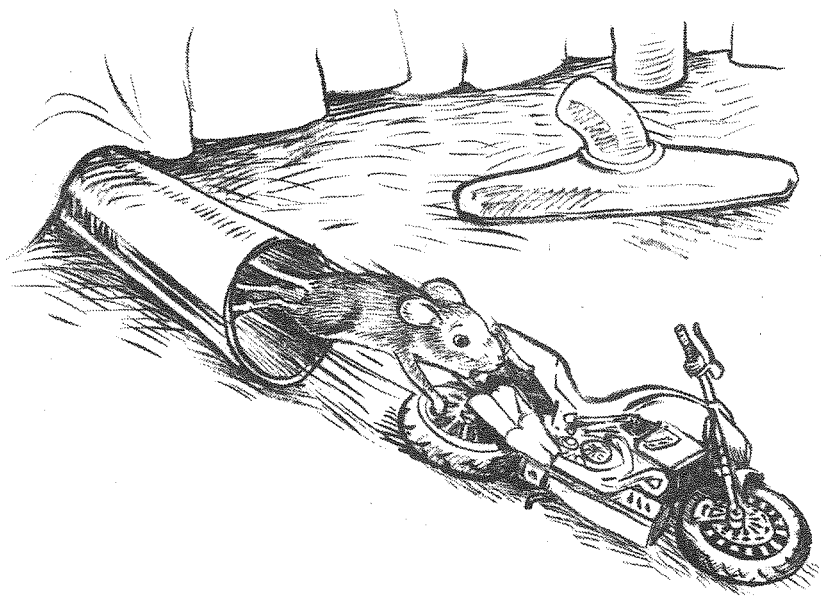
Recklessly the maid pushed the open end of the tube back and forth any old way. There was no guessing which way it would go next. Ralph had to run with the motorcycle to avoid that terrifying hole at the end of the tube. He ran to the right, he ran to the left, and still the maid pushed the tube around,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