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A FAMILY REUNION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sh-h-h!”

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

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

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

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

Behind Ralph his relatives began to tiptoe

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

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

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

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

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

"What for?" Ralph still did not understand.

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

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

"Lost the motorcycle!" Keith, who had



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

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

dumped into the laundry hamper," confessed Ralph.

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

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

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

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

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

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

was a terrible thing he had done.

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

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

9

RALPH TAKES COMMAND

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

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

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

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

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

"Hi," said Keith.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened?" Ralph was fascinated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure. What do you want?"

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

"And some toast?"

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

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



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

“Dear me,” Ralph’s mother was saying,



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

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

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

she could not tell her son what was wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Room service!" exclaimed his mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ralph had not thought of this.

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

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

10

AN ANXIOUS NIGHT

At first Ralph's scheme worked. Keith delivered the promised bacon, toast, and jelly; the mice ate sparingly and laid aside the leftovers against the day Keith must leave the hotel. Ralph's mother continued to worry about tipping room service. "I want to do the right thing," she insisted. "There must be some way we could manage a tip." The mice dared not leave the

nest to search for small coins that might have rolled under beds and dressers.

It was late in the afternoon when Ralph heard Keith and his parents returning to their rooms. Very quietly, so that his toenails did not make scrabbling sounds in the woodwork, he slipped to the knothole and peeped out in time to see Keith flop down on the bed.

"Do I have to go down to the dining room for dinner?" Keith asked his mother and father. "I'm not hungry."

Oh-oh, thought Ralph. There goes dinner.

"I told you not to eat that whole bag of peanuts so close to dinnertime," said his father.

"I didn't eat all of it," said Keith.

That's good, thought Ralph. At least there would be peanuts for dinner.

"You'll feel better after you get washed

up for dinner," said Mrs. Gridley. "Hurry along now."

When his parents had gone into Room 216, Ralph noticed that Keith seemed to drag himself off the bed. He walked to the washbasin, turned on the cold water, moistened his fingers, and wiped them over his face. Then he turned off the water and gave the middle of his face a swipe with a towel, which he returned to the towel rack in such a way that it immediately fell to the floor. Keith did not pick it up, but there was nothing unusual about this. Boys rarely picked up towels. What was unusual was that Keith returned to the bed, where he sat down and stared at the wall. He did not play with his cars, nor did he eat the rest of his peanuts. He just sat there.

Ralph stuck his head out of the knot-hole. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, hi," answered Keith listlessly. "I feel sort of awful."



“Say, that’s too bad.” Ralph ventured a little farther out of the knothole. “I know what you mean. Thinking about the motorcycle makes me feel awful, too.”

“It’s not that kind of awful,” said Keith.

"I feel awful in a different way. Sort of in my insides."

"Think you'll make it to dinner?" asked Ralph.

"Oh, I guess so." There was no enthusiasm in Keith's voice. "Anything I can bring you?"

"Whatever is handy," said Ralph, who hesitated to place an order when he could see Keith did not feel like going to dinner at all. "We are . . . sort of depending on you. The housekeeper found all those sheets I had to chew through to get out of the hamper, and I understand she got pretty excited about mice. We are lying low until the whole thing blows over."

A smile flickered across Keith's face. "Don't worry. I won't let you down. I saved you some peanuts. I thought they might be handy for storing."

"Gee, thanks," said Ralph.

Keith got slowly off the bed and poked the peanuts, one by one, through the knot-hole. When he had finished Ralph popped out again and said, "Thanks a lot."

Keith smiled feebly and flopped down on the bed once more. Ralph went to work moving the peanuts away from the knot-hole to make room for whatever dinner Keith brought. He felt it would be fun to be surprised by the menu this time.

It was something of a shock to find that dinner, which was stuffed through the knot-hole much earlier than Ralph expected, consisted of a couple of broken soda crackers.

Ralph poked his head out to see if more was coming, but Keith was getting into his pajamas.

"Aren't you going to bed pretty early?" asked Ralph, realizing he had not heard Keith's parents come in.

"I felt so awful I couldn't eat so they told

me I had better come up and go to bed." Keith tossed his shirt on the foot of the bed and pulled on his pajama top. When his head emerged, he said, "I'm sorry about your dinner. It was the best I could do. All I had was a little soup."

"That's all right." Ralph was beginning to be concerned. If the boy could not eat, neither could the mice. Keith fell into bed and Ralph ran off to report the news to his relatives.

"What a shame," said Ralph's mother. "The poor boy!"

"Oh dear, whatever shall we do?" cried Aunt Dorothy. "Our very lives depend on him." The little cousins huddled together, big-eyed and frightened.

"Yes, what about us?" asked Uncle Lester. "How are we going to manage if he doesn't bring us our meals? It isn't safe for us to go out pilfering when the housekeeper

has declared war on mice.”

“I knew it was a mistake to depend on people,” said Aunt Sissy.

“We’ll manage somehow. We always have.” Ralph’s mother was trying to be brave, but Ralph could see how worried she was. “After all, he did bring us a supply of peanuts. We should be grateful for that.”

“He didn’t bring many peanuts.” Uncle Lester did not sound the least bit grateful. “The greedy fellow is probably ill from stuffing himself with nuts he should have saved for us. Serves him right.”

“Now Lester,” fussed Ralph’s mother. “The boy had a right to eat his own peanuts, but I do wish he hadn’t been quite so hungry.”

Ralph returned to the knothole. Keith was lying in bed with his sports car in one hand. “How do you feel now?” asked Ralph.

“Awful,” answered Keith.

Before Ralph could reply, footsteps in the hall warned him that Keith's parents were coming. He drew back inside the knothole where he could observe without being seen. Mrs. Gridley paused by her son's bed and laid her hand on his forehead. "He does feel a little warm," she remarked.

"He'll probably be all right in the morning," said Mr. Gridley. "He just hiked too far in the sun this afternoon."

"I hope so." The boy's mother sounded less certain.

Mr. Gridley filled a glass at the washbasin and brought it to Keith. "Here, Son, drink this." When Keith had drunk the water he fell back on the pillow and closed his eyes. His parents went quietly into Room 216.

When it was good and dark Ralph ventured through the knothole. He could hear Keith breathing deeply and he knew that he was asleep. Since he had no one to talk to,

he found his little crash helmet where he had hidden it behind the curtain and, after he had adjusted the rubber band under his chin, he climbed up to the windowsill to look out into the world beyond the hotel and to dream about the lost motorcycle.

From his perch on the windowsill Ralph saw that the parking lot held more cars than



usual. This meant that the motels back on the highway were full and travelers had followed the sign pointing to the Mountain View Inn. He could hear the holiday weekend activity in the halls, too—people walking up and down, luggage being set with a thump on the floor, keys rattling in locks. Gradually, as the night wore on, the hotel grew silent, more silent than usual for now even the second-floor mice were quiet. There was no scurrying, scrabbling, or squeaking inside the walls.

In the silence Keith tossed in his sleep and mumbled something that sounded like "motorcycle." In a moment his mother slipped through the doorway, pulling her robe on over her nightgown. Ralph hid behind the curtain, peeping out just enough to see what was going to happen. She laid her hand on her son's forehead and murmured, "Oh, dear."

Almost at once she was joined by Keith's

father, who was tying the belt to his bathrobe. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Keith has a fever," answered the mother. "He's burning up."

Ralph was shocked. The boy really was sick. It was not too many peanuts or too much hiking. The boy was really and truly sick.

The father turned on the lamp on the bedside table and he too laid his hand on the boy's forehead. Keith opened his eyes. "I'm so hot," he mumbled. "I want a drink."

His mother pulled back a blanket while the father brought a glass of water and held up his son's head so he could drink part of it.

Ralph watched anxiously, but this time he was not selfishly concerned about room service. He was concerned about Keith, the boy who had saved him from a terrible fate in the wastebasket and who had trusted him with his motorcycle, the boy who had

forgiven him when he had lost that motorcycle and who had brought food, not only for Ralph, but for his whole family.

"We had better give him an aspirin to bring down his temperature," said Mrs. Gridley.

Mr. Gridley started toward Room 216, stopped, and snapped his fingers as if he had just remembered something. "I took the last one back in Rock Springs, Wyoming," he said. "I had a headache from driving toward the sun all afternoon. I meant to buy some more when we stopped, but I didn't think of it again until now."

"I should have thought of it myself," said Mrs. Gridley. "I knew we were almost out."

"Never mind. I'll get some." Mr. Gridley picked up the telephone, listened, shook it, listened again, and said, "That's peculiar. The line seems to be dead."

"They must disconnect the switchboard

at night," said the mother, "but surely there is someone on duty at the desk downstairs. Every hotel has a night clerk."

"I'll go find out," said the father, and slipped out the door into the hall.

"I'm so hot," mumbled Keith. "I'm so hot."

His mother wrung out a washcloth in cold water and laid it on her son's forehead. "You'll feel better as soon as we get you an aspirin," she whispered.

The minutes dragged by. What's keeping him? thought Ralph. Why doesn't he hurry? The old hotel snapped and creaked. Keith rolled and tossed, trying to find a cool spot on the pillow, and his mother wrung out the washcloth in more cold water.

"When's Dad coming?" asked Keith, his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed.

"In a minute," soothed his mother. "He'll be here in a minute."

I wish he would hurry, thought Ralph.

Still the minutes dragged. Finally footsteps were heard in the hall and Mr. Gridley returned to Room 215.

"He's here with the aspirin," whispered Mrs. Gridley to Keith.

At last, thought Ralph. I thought he would never come.

Mr. Gridley shook his head. "There isn't an aspirin to be found anyplace." He sounded thoroughly exasperated. "First of all, the night clerk was sound asleep on a couch in the lobby. I had a dickens of a time waking him up and when I finally did manage to, he couldn't find any aspirin anywhere."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the mother.

Oh, no! echoed Ralph's thoughts.

"What about that little gift shop off the lobby?" asked Mrs. Gridley. "It must sell aspirin."

"Locked up tight and the clerk went

home with the key," answered Mr. Gridley.

"Oh, dear!"

"The night clerk was really very nice about it," said the father. "He even came up and looked in the housekeeper's office."

"How far is the nearest drugstore?"

"Twenty-five miles back on the main highway," answered the father. "And it closed at ten o'clock and doesn't open until nine in the morning."

The mother held her watch under the lamp. "And it is almost one o'clock. It is hours until morning." She crossed the room to wring out the washcloth again. "What will we do?"

"What can we do?" asked the father helplessly. "I even telephoned the doctor, but there has been a bad accident back on the highway and he can't come. The night clerk said he would telephone the milkman before he starts his route at six and ask him

if he can bring some aspirin, but he won't get here until seven or later. All we can do is wait."

Keith tossed under the cold washcloth. "Mom, I think I'd like to go to sleep now," he muttered thickly.

"I guess that is all you can do," said his mother, and bent over to kiss his hot forehead before she turned out the light.

Ralph did not even wait for the boy's parents to leave the room. As soon as the light was out he leaped silently to the carpet, and by the time they had gone through the doorway into Room 216 he had hidden his little crash helmet behind the curtain and was halfway through the knothole. Somewhere, someplace in that hotel there must be an aspirin tablet and Ralph was going to find it. He only wished he had the motorcycle so he could travel faster.

11

THE SEARCH

“**I** have to go out into the hotel,” Ralph informed his relatives. “I’ve got to help the boy.”

“Oh, no, not out into the hotel,” cried Ralph’s mother. “Not while the house-keeper is looking for mice. If you’re seen we’ll all be in danger.”

“I’ll be back before dawn,” said Ralph staunchly. “I must go. Don’t try to stop me.”

"See here, my boy, aren't you being a bit dramatic?" asked Uncle Lester. "Whatever do you have to go out into the hotel for?"

"To pilfer a pill," said Ralph. "An aspirin tablet." His answer was dramatic enough even for Uncle Lester. His entire family stared at him in disbelief. Not an aspirin! Not after his own father had been poisoned by one of the dread tablets.

"An aspirin!" Ralph's mother gasped. "No, Ralph, not that! Anything but that!"

"It is the only way." Ralph stood tall and brave. "The boy has a fever and he needs an aspirin. I'm going to find him one."

"Oh, Ralph!" His mother hid her face in her paws.

"But Ralph," quavered Aunt Sissy. "Remember your father. You can't carry an aspirin in your cheek pouches. It would poison you. How could you get one here?"



"I'll find a way." Ralph was outwardly steadfast in his determination, but inside he wondered how he would manage to get an aspirin into Room 215 if he did find one. Roll it, perhaps.

"Ralph, stay here," pleaded his mother. "You're too young. Let your Uncle Lester go."

"Well, now, let's talk this over," said Uncle Lester.

"I'm not too young and I haven't a moment to lose." Ralph, who was really frightened by what he was about to do, also enjoyed the drama of the moment. "Good-bye. I shall return before dawn."

"Ralph, promise me you'll be careful," pleaded his mother. "Promise me you won't climb into suitcases like your Aunt Adrienne." Ralph's Aunt Adrienne, who liked nice things, had climbed into a suitcase to examine a nylon stocking, someone had closed the suitcase, and Aunt Adrienne had never been seen again. It was hoped she had been carried away to a life of luxury. "Promise me, Ralph," cried his mother, but her son was already on his way out the knothole.

Ralph scurried across the carpet of Room 215, flattened himself, and squeezed under

the door. Once out in the hall, his courage ebbed. The aspirin tablet seemed a very small thing to find in such a vast place. It would be much easier to find the motorcycle. No, thought Ralph, I must not even think about the motorcycle.

Ralph began to feel pretty small himself, much smaller than he had felt during his show of bravery back in the mouse nest. Down in the lobby a clock struck one. There was not a moment to lose. He ran to the next room, squeezed under the door, and searched under the beds and the dresser while the two guests slept soundly. All he found was a bobby pin.

He skipped Room 211 because his enemy, the little terrier, was still there, and ran on to Room 209. A hurried search, frightening because of the loud and uneven snores that came from one of the beds, revealed nothing but a few pretzel crumbs,

which Ralph did not have time to eat.

On and on ran Ralph, down the hall, under doors, around under beds and dressers. There was not a single aspirin tablet to be found. In one of the rooms he did see a penny that had rolled under a luggage rack and remembered his mother's wish to leave a tip for room service, but tonight he had no time for pennies. He must press on and find an aspirin.

A small doubt began to creep into Ralph's thoughts as he ran down the hall to the last room on the second floor. Maybe there was no aspirin. Maybe he was risking his life and the lives of his family for nothing. But Ralph pushed the thought aside. He would not let himself become discouraged. If there was no aspirin on the second floor, there had to be one someplace on the ground floor. Tonight he was willing to brave the stairs to find it. He flattened himself and squeezed under the last

door on the second floor. There was nothing under either of the beds but the things Keith called dust mice. There was no sound but the rattle of the windows in the wind.

Ralph started across the carpet toward the dresser when suddenly a light from the bedside table blinded him. He stopped, rooted to the carpet by fear, even though it was not likely that anyone was going to cut off *his* tail with a carving knife.

He heard someone slip out of bed and utter a sound halfway between a squeal and a scream. Before Ralph knew what was happening, an ordinary drinking glass had been clapped down over him, and there he stood in a glass trap.

By then his eyes were adjusted to the light and he found himself facing a pair of bare feet. Looking up, he saw that the feet belonged to a young woman in a pink nightgown.



“Mary Lou, wake up,” she whispered to the young woman in the other bed. “Look what I’ve caught.”

“Huh?” said Mary Lou, blinking and raising up on one elbow. Her hair was done up on pink rollers. “Betty, are you out of your mind? It must be past one o’clock in the morning.”

The night was slipping by much too quickly for the trapped mouse. He was terrified and he was desperate. No one in his family had ever been trapped under a drinking glass before. Worst of all, he was failing Keith and endangering his family.

"Wake up, Mary Lou, and look," insisted Betty. "I was getting up to stop the rattle in the window and caught a mouse!"

This news roused Mary Lou from bed, and the two young women knelt on the carpet to look at Ralph, who promptly turned his back. He did not care to be stared at in his misery, but it was no use. The women moved around to the other side of the glass.

"Isn't he darling?" said Betty.

"Just look at his cunning little paws." Mary Lou leaned closer for a better look.

"And his little ears. Aren't they sweet?" Betty was delighted.

It was disgusting. It was bad enough to be trapped and stared at, but to have this

pair carrying on in such a gushy fashion was almost more than Ralph could stomach. Cunning little paws indeed! They were strong paws, paws for grasping the hand-grips of a motorcycle.

"Oh, Betty, do you suppose we could take him back to Wichita with us?" asked Mary Lou. "My third grade would love him."

"So would my kindergarten," agreed Betty. "We could keep him in a cage on the ledge and all the children could bring him food from home. It would be such a good experience for them to have a pet in the classroom."

Well, thought Ralph grimly, I always wanted to travel. A cage in a kindergarten in Wichita, however, was not exactly the destination he had in mind. The minutes were slipping by dangerously fast. He had to do something. "Look," he shouted through the glass in desperation. "Let me go. Please let me go. There's something

terribly important I've got to do."

"He squeaked!" marveled Betty.

"He's adorable!" squealed Mary Lou.

It was no use. Young women could not speak his language. Ralph was in despair. He thought of Keith tossing feverishly in his bed and of his family huddled in the mouse nest waiting for his safe return.

"But I don't see how we could take him back to Wichita," said Betty sensibly. "We're driving to San Francisco and then to Disneyland before we start back. How could we carry him thousands of miles?"

The two teachers looked thoughtfully at Ralph, who knew his fate depended on their decision. Was he to be carried to Disneyland and eventually to a ledge in a kindergarten room in Wichita? Or would they let him go? A third possibility crossed Ralph's mind. Perhaps they would leave him under the glass for the housekeeper to see. He hoped not. He did not think he could last that long.

Already the inside of the glass was beginning to feel warm and airless.

"I suppose we really shouldn't turn him loose in the hotel," said Mary Lou. "Mice are pests even if they are cute."

The teacher not only destroyed Ralph's hopes, she hurt his feelings as well, calling him a pest when he was on an errand of mercy. From the mouse's point of view, the teachers were the pests.

"I know!" exclaimed Betty suddenly, causing Ralph to look over his shoulder for a clue to what it was she knew. "I know how we can get rid of him without hurting him."

The young teacher reached over to the bedside table, where she picked up a picture postcard. She slid it carefully under the glass and under Ralph's feet so that he was now standing on a postcard. He noticed the picture was of a giant redwood tree, the same postcard all travelers bought

when they came to California.

"Now what are you going to do?" asked Mary Lou.

"Watch." Betty carefully lifted the postcard, Ralph, and the glass, and walked across the room.

Even though he knew it was useless, Ralph scabbled around in his tiny prison. He was afraid she was taking him toward the washbasin. He had heard of mice being drowned by people who did not like traps.

The teacher walked not to the washbasin, but to the open window. She held Ralph across the sill, removed the postcard from the glass, and gave it a little jerk that shook Ralph off into the vines that grew up the side of the building.

"There," she said, and closed the window, leaving Ralph clinging to a vine high above the ground.

12

AN ERRAND OF MERCY

Owls! thought Ralph, as he clung to the Virginia creeper and filled his lungs with the cool night air that was such a relief after the stuffy drinking glass. I've always wanted to climb down this vine and explore the ground floor, he reminded himself grimly, and now I have to. Ralph had never before been outdoors beneath the moon and the stars. He felt small and



frightened and alone.

Slowly, paw over paw, he worked his way along the shoots and tendrils. An owl, uncomfortably close in a pine tree, hooted, and Ralph huddled shivering in



the shadow of a leaf, aware that he was losing precious seconds.

A night wind rattled the windows and the owl glided off across the parking lot. Ralph inched

his way down the vine. It was a long winding route full of detours to the ground-floor window, which, to Ralph's relief, was open.

Upon reaching the sill, Ralph leaped to the floor of the room, in which three young men of college age were sleeping, two in beds and one in a sleeping bag on the floor.

An aspirin, I must find an aspirin, thought Ralph, darting under the bed. He bumped into a dust mouse, which startled him, but he did not find an aspirin. He was in such a hurry he ran right over the man in the sleeping bag instead of taking time to go around. There under the dresser, gleaming

in a shaft of moonlight, he saw a round white pill. He went closer.

Yes, it really was an aspirin tablet. At last! Ralph was positive it was an aspirin and not some other pill because it had letters stamped on it. Ralph could not read the letters, but he knew they stood for an aspirin. He had been warned about them often enough. Now all Ralph had to do was figure out how to get the pill upstairs to Room 215.

Telling himself that in spite of all that had happened that night, it could not be much past one o'clock in the morning, Ralph half pushed and half rolled the aspirin tablet around the man in the sleeping bag to the door. He shoved it under the door and with great difficulty squeezed under himself. The first-floor carpet was thicker and of better quality than that of the second floor.



Ralph worked his way with the aspirin down the hall to the lobby where the night clerk was asleep on a couch. The glassy eyes of deer heads mounted on the knotty pine walls seemed to stare at Ralph. So did the giant eye of the television set. Slowly he moved his precious load across the lobby to the stairs and there he stopped. How could he manage to get that aspirin up those stairs? He picked it up and tried lifting it, even though he knew he could not reach the first step with it.

The night clerk tossed on the couch and made a gobbling, snorting noise. Ralph dropped the aspirin in a panic and looked wildly about for a hiding place. With one terrified leap he dived under the grandfather clock between the elevator and the stairs. It was immediately plain from the dust that no one ever cleaned under the clock.

"A-haa. A-haa." Ralph struggled to

control a sneeze. Above him the works of the clock began to make grinding noises.

"A-choo!" The sneeze could not be held back.

Bong! The clock struck one thirty, forcing Ralph to clap his hands over his ears. How his famous ancestor, the one that ran up the clock, hickory-dickory-dock, stood the racket, he did not know.

Peeking out, Ralph discovered the night clerk had slept soundly through the din, so he ventured out from under the clock to continue his struggle with the aspirin tablet.

Since carrying the pill up the stairs was impossible, Ralph had to find another way. The elevator? Ridiculous. A mouse could not run an elevator. Then, quite unexpectedly, a whole plan of action popped into his mind. Ralph had a genuine inspiration.

First he rolled the aspirin to a safe place behind the ashtray stand beside the elevator.

Then, empty-pawed, he climbed the stairs to the second floor and ran down the hall to Room 215, where he squeezed under the door. Keith was still half awake, his eyes glinting with fever under their heavy lids.

"Pst!" said Ralph. "I've found an aspirin for you."

"Hm-m?" murmured Keith.

"An aspirin tablet. I've found an aspirin!"

"Where is it?" Keith was more awake now.

"Down on the first floor."

"Oh." Keith was obviously disappointed.

"Now wait," said Ralph. "I can get it up here, but I've got to have some help. You'll have to let me take your sports car."

"You're too young," mumbled Keith.

"I am *not*." And it was true that Ralph felt very much older than he had when he lost the motorcycle. "Come on. You need that aspirin, don't you?"

"You already lost my motorcycle."

"Oh, come *on*." Ralph was growing more impatient as he felt the night slipping by. "If you won't let me take the sports car, will you let me take the ambulance?"

"I guess so." Keith did not feel equal to arguing with a determined mouse. He picked up his ambulance from the bedside table and set it on the floor. "Here."

"One more thing," said Ralph anxiously. "Do you think you could manage to open the door for me? I know you feel terrible, but it is the last thing I'll ask. Honest. And I promise I'll have the aspirin up here in no time."

Keith sighed but he slid his feet out from under the sheet and, hanging onto the bedside table, reached over and opened the door.

Ralph was already seated in the white ambulance with the red cross painted on the side. "*Wh-e-e. Wh-e-e. Wh-e-e.*" He took the corner into the hall on two wheels and sped down the bare floor between the wall and the carpet until he came to Room 211. Here

he slowed down and then went, "*Wh-e-e! Wh-e-e! Wh-e-e!*" good and loud. This carried him, as he had planned, to the elevator. It was a crucial moment. Now he would find out if his plan was going to work.

The little dog in Room 211 began to whimper and then to bark just as Ralph had planned.

In a moment the door opened and the man stumbled out with the little terrier in his arms. "Oh, all right," he grumbled. "I'll walk you. Shut up, will you?"

Ralph waited, his paws tense on the steering wheel.

The man walked groggily to the closed elevator door, where he managed, in spite of the wriggling dog in his arms, to push the button. Soon the elevator door slid open.

Ralph knew that timing was important. The man entered the elevator. The dog barked. "*Wh-e-e! Wh-e-e!*" said Ralph

hard enough and fast enough to shoot the ambulance at great speed across the yawning crack between the floor of the hall and the floor of the elevator before the man turned around. As the dog's owner turned, Ralph steered skillfully around his feet and parked the ambulance behind him. The man pressed the button, the doors closed, and the elevator actually began to descend.

"Do you know what you are?" the man sleepily asked the dog. "You are a nuisance, that's what you are. A four-footed, hair-covered nuisance."

The dog ignored his master. "I know you're down there," he yapped to Ralph. "If I could just get down I'd get you!"

Ralph did not answer. He was taking no chances. He waited quietly inside his ambulance until the man had carried the dog out before he drove out of the elevator. He jumped out of the ambulance, opened

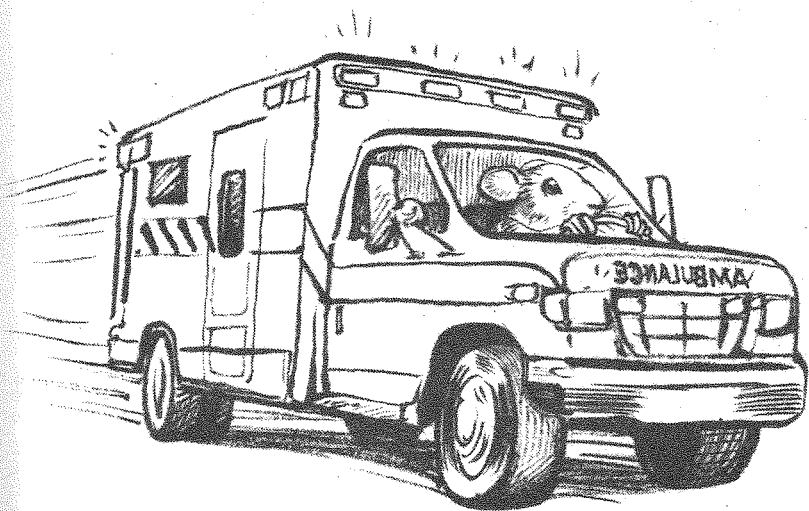
the rear doors, seized the precious aspirin, and boosted it inside. Slamming the doors, he ran around and jumped into the driver's seat. There was not an instant to lose.

"*Wh-e-e. Wh-e-e.*" The ambulance moved toward the open elevator, but unfortunately by this time Ralph was slightly out of breath. The front wheels of the ambulance caught in the crack between the floor of the lobby and the floor of the elevator. The ambulance was stuck.

Oh, no, thought Ralph. Not now. I can't fail now. "*Wh-e-e. Wh-e-e,*" he managed to gasp. The wheels spun but the ambulance did not move. Ralph jumped out, put his shoulder to the rear of the vehicle, and pushed with all his strength. Nothing happened. In a moment the man would be returning with his dog.

Desperate, Ralph climbed back into the ambulance. He took a breath so deep

he thought his lungs would surely burst. "Wh-e-e! Wh-e-e! Wh-e-e!" He made the sound hard and fast and high-pitched. The wheels spun. The ambulance moved, slowly at first, and then as the tires got a grip on the floor of the elevator, it shot out of the crack and across the elevator and hit the rear wall with a bump. Ralph collapsed over the steering wheel, limp with relief, just as the man came back through the lobby with his dog.



"I guess some boy lost his toy ambulance," muttered the man, more awake now, as he stepped in and pressed the button.

Toy! thought Ralph indignantly. This ambulance is carrying medical supplies to the sick.

"Boy, my foot!" yapped the terrier. "It's that dastardly mouse. Let me down and I'll get him!"

Ralph did not try to answer. He was saving all his breath now to get the ambulance across that crack once more.

The man slapped the dog lightly on the nose and said, "Be quiet! I took you outside, didn't I?"

Fortunately the elevator door stayed open behind the man as he walked out, so Ralph had no trouble driving the ambulance out and down the hall to Room 215. The door had blown shut but he did not care. He jumped out of the ambulance and

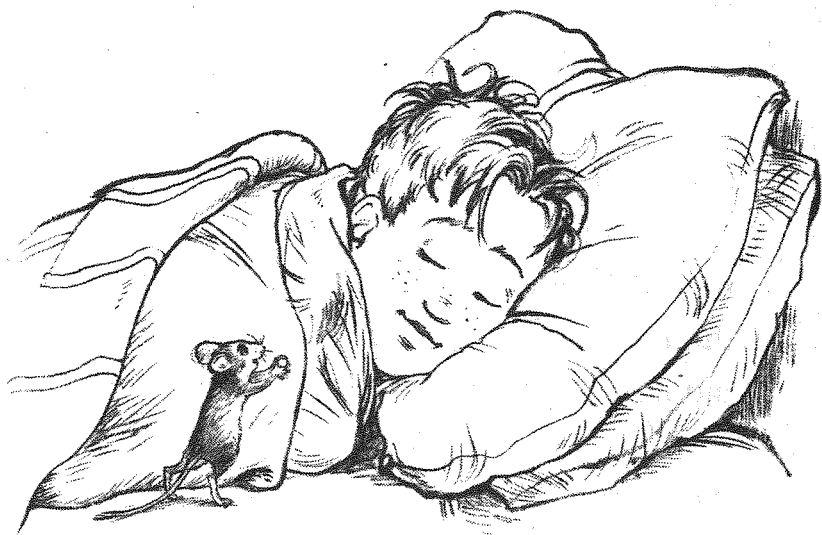
ran around to the back, where he unloaded the aspirin, shoved it under the bedroom door, and squeezed under after it.

"Hey, Keith! I've got it!" Ralph was filled with triumph. "I've brought you an aspirin!"

13

A SUBJECT FOR A COMPOSITION

Ralph was a hero in the mousehole that night. His admiring relatives gathered around, begging to hear the story of his adventures. Ralph could not help bragging a little as he told the story of his travels, beginning with the search of the second-floor rooms, skipping the part about the teacher trapping him under a drinking glass, and ending with Keith's taking the



aspirin and finally falling asleep.

"But are you sure it really was an aspirin tablet?" Ralph's mother could always find something to worry about. "Are you sure it wasn't some other kind of pill?"

"Keith put it on the bedside table and refused to take it until his mother saw it," explained Ralph. "At first his mother and father got pretty excited and thought he was out of his mind from the fever when he

started telling them there was an aspirin on the table. Then when they saw the pill and could tell from the letters on it that it really was an aspirin they decided the night clerk must have found it and brought it up. They thought the windows rattled so much they did not hear his knock."

"Oh, Ralph, I am so proud of you," said his mother with a sigh of relief while his brothers and sisters and cousins stared at him with shining eyes.

"Good work, Ralph. I didn't think you could do it," said Uncle Lester heartily.

"I feel much better about room service now that we have left an aspirin for a tip," said Ralph's mother. "I feel that at last we have done the right thing."

"Our Ralph is growing up," said Aunt Sissy.

"Yes, Ralph is growing up," agreed his mother with a sad note in her voice. "It's

hard to believe. It seems only yesterday that he was a tiny pink mouse without any hair."

Naturally this embarrassed Ralph, but now that his mother had finally admitted he was growing up, he decided to make the most of this moment. "*Now* can I go down to the first floor by myself?" he asked eagerly.

"We'll see," said his mother, looking worried once more.

"Nonsense," said Uncle Lester. "Of course he may go. Ralph has shown that he can be a very responsible mouse."

"I guess you're right," agreed Ralph's mother nervously.

"Oh, boy!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Tell us again how you climbed down the vine and the owl nearly got you," begged a cousin.

"No, tell us again how the ambulance got stuck in the crack," said another.

"No, tell the part about how you got the dog to bark," pleaded a third.

The only flaw in the evening for Ralph was the fact that he had not found the motorcycle on his travels through the hotel.

Keith slept soundly and the next morning, although he still had a temperature, Ralph was pleased to see he was feeling much better.

"Do you hurt anyplace?" Mrs. Gridley asked anxiously, after she had given her son an aspirin brought by the milkman. "Is your throat sore? Does your stomach ache?"

Keith shook his head. "I just feel sort of tired."

"He's going to be all right. He must have picked up a bug someplace," said Mrs. Gridley to her husband. "A day in bed with plenty of fluids and he'll be on his feet again."

Mr. Gridley nodded. "Do you feel like eating any breakfast?" he asked Keith. "We

can order something for you from room service."

Keith brightened. "Can I really have something sent up from room service?" he asked, and when his father assured him he could, he slumped back into the pillow. "But I'm not hungry."

"Some orange juice would be good for you," suggested his mother.

"All right," agreed Keith, and then added as if he suddenly had an inspiration, "and bacon and toast and jelly."

"Your appetite seems to have come back in a hurry," remarked Mr. Gridley, as he picked up the telephone and asked to be connected with room service to order, he thought, breakfast for his son.

As soon as the adults had gone, Ralph popped out into the room.

"Hi," said Keith. "Thanks a lot for the aspirin. It really helped."

"That's all right," answered Ralph modestly.

"Where did you find it?" Keith was curious to know.

"Under a dresser down on the first floor."

"The first floor!" Keith could not believe it. "How did you manage to get it up here?"

Once more Ralph told the story of his night's adventure, skipping the part about the drinking glass, but making it sound as if he had narrowly escaped the horny talons of the owl as he traveled down the vine.

"Golly!" Keith was amazed at Ralph's story. "You know what? You're a pretty smart mouse. And a brave one, too."

"It was nothing," said Ralph in an off-hand manner.

"Nothing! It was plenty. You risked your life!"

The boy's admiration and gratitude made Ralph feel even prouder of what he had done. "I parked your ambulance out in the

hall," he said, wanting Keith to know how responsible he was. "Your folks will probably see it and bring it in when they come back."

"That reminds me. You didn't happen to see my motorcycle anyplace, did you?" Keith's question was unexpected.

"Well, no, I didn't." Ralph suddenly felt less proud of himself. "But I didn't have much time to look."

"Yeah, I know." Keith was sympathetic. "I just wondered. . . ."

A knock at the door sent Ralph scurrying to the knothole.

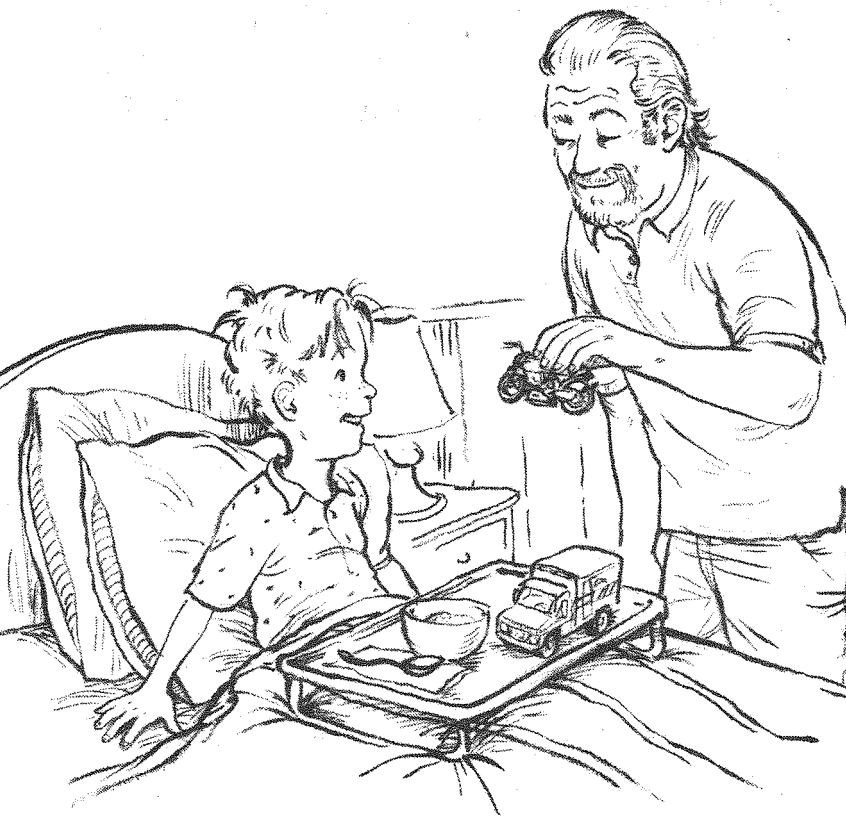
"Come in," called Keith.

Matt entered with a tray. "Here you are and here is your ambulance. I found it out in the hall," he said as he set the tray across Keith's knees. "Sorry to see you're under the weather."

"Thank you. I'll be all right." Keith handed Matt a coin his father had left for a

tip. "And thanks for bringing in my ambulance."

Matt pocketed the coin. "Thank you," he said, "and, by the way, this doesn't happen to be yours, does it?" He pulled the little motorcycle out of his pocket.



Ralph was so excited he almost fell out of the knothole.

"Hey!" Keith sat up straight, rocking the orange juice on his tray. "It sure is. Where did you find it?"

"In a hamper of linen that had been chewed by mice. Or by a mouse. It fell out when the housekeeper was showing us the damage that had been done. I picked it up before anyone noticed it."

"Gee, thanks. Thanks a lot." Keith accepted the motorcycle and set it on his tray. "It's my favorite. I didn't like losing it."

"I wonder how it got into that hamper of linen?" mused Matt.

Keith grinned but said nothing.

Old Matt rubbed his chin and stared at the ceiling. "I don't suppose a certain irresponsible mouse happened to ride it into a pile of sheets and pillowcases and get tangled up and dumped into the hamper."

Keith tried not to laugh. "I don't know

any irresponsible mice," he said. "Only one responsible mouse. Say, how did you guess?"

"There isn't much around this hotel that escapes my attention," said Matt. "I saw that mouse out in the hall with the little motorcycle. I imagine he's a regular speed demon."

Ralph could no longer stay out of the conversation. "I'm fast but I'm careful. I haven't had an accident yet," he boasted, and added hastily, recalling his fall into the wastebasket, "at least not since I learned to ride the motorcycle."

"If there is anything I can't stand, it's a cheeky mouse," remarked Matt good-naturedly. "What do you call getting tangled up in a lot of linen?"

"What I mean is, I didn't crack up in the motorcycle," said Ralph with dignity.

"He's not cheeky," defended Keith. "He's brave. You—you aren't going to tell

the management about him, are you?"

"What's the use?" said Matt. "If they get rid of these mice more will move in. Anyway, he's a cute little fellow. It cheers me up just to think of him tearing around on a little motorcycle."

If only I could, thought Ralph.

There followed an unusually pleasant day for the mice. Keith stuffed the bacon and toast and jelly through the knothole. The mice feasted on bacon and jelly before the ants could get at them and stored the toast against the rapidly approaching time when Keith must leave the hotel. They slept all morning while Keith alternately napped and played with his cars. For lunch they enjoyed peanut butter sandwiches again.

Ralph did not sleep well that afternoon. He found himself thinking of the tantalizing glimpse he had had of the ground floor and of all the opportunities it offered

mice—crumbs in the dining room, leftovers in the kitchen, scraps in the garbage. He lay daydreaming on a pile of shredded Kleenex. He could see himself on the first floor pilfering crumbs in the dining room at night after the guests were in bed. And from the dining room he would go to the kitchen right past the night clerk, who was sure to be asleep. If only he could make the trip on the motorcycle. . . .

The thought of the motorcycle put an end to Ralph's daydream and made sleep impossible. After tossing about on his bed of Kleenex, he got up and poked his head out the knothole. Keith was awake, lying back on the pillows with his cars beside him. He smiled wanly at Ralph.

"How are you feeling?" asked Ralph.

"Sort of tired," answered Keith.

Ralph climbed through the hole. "Where are your folks?"

"They went out for a little while. They'll be back. I'm supposed to take a nap."

"Are you going to?" asked Ralph.

"I'd rather talk to you." Keith leaned over and set the motorcycle on the floor.

"Want to ride it?" he asked.

"Do I want to ride it!" Ralph could scarcely believe he had heard correctly.

"You mean you'll let me? After the way I lost it for you?"

"You proved you could be responsible when you brought me the aspirin," explained Keith. "You're more grown up."

"Thanks," said Ralph modestly.

"I guess mice grow up faster than boys." Keith sounded as though he longed to grow as rapidly as a mouse.

"You grow a little bit every day," Ralph said, as he removed his crash helmet from its hiding place behind the curtain.

"I guess you're right," agreed Keith. "My

dad measures me every six months against the doorjamb of our kitchen back in Ohio, and each mark he makes is higher than the last, but I never feel myself growing."

"You wait long enough and you will be a grown-up." Ralph felt as if he had said something very wise as he slipped the rubber band on his crash helmet around his whiskers.

"I guess so." Keith slumped back on the pillows. "But it takes so long."

"I grew up, didn't I?" asked Ralph. "You said yourself I had become a responsible mouse."

"Yes, you did," said Keith thoughtfully. "I guess that's part of the secret. Just getting bigger isn't enough. You have to learn things like not taking off down a steep hill on a bicycle when you aren't used to hand brakes. Stuff like that."

Ralph walked with a slight swagger to

the motorcycle, grabbed the handgrips, and threw his leg across the seat. He remembered to pick up his tail before he started. *Pb-pb-b-b-b*. He took off across the carpet and circled the room, covering the rough parts under the dresser and chair and coming to a halt beside the bed. "She has good balance on a rough road," said Ralph with authority. "She's a mighty fine machine."

"Say, Ralph," said Keith, suddenly sitting up. "How would you like to come with me when we leave the hotel?"

"Come with you!" Ralph was stunned. He had expected to live and die in the Mountain View Inn, and now he was being offered the opportunity for travel that he had dreamed of.

"Yes. Come with me to San Francisco and then back to Ohio."

Ralph's first thought was of the motorcycle. If he went with Keith he would not

have to be separated from the motorcycle.

Keith must have sensed Ralph's thoughts because he said, "You could ride the motorcycle every day."

Ralph was silent. He had begun to think of other things—his family, the permission he had earned to visit the ground floor, Keith's family and how they might feel about a mouse.

"Come on, Ralph," said Keith. "You could travel in my pocket."

"Your mother doesn't care for mice," Ralph pointed out.

"Not running around loose," agreed Keith. "But she let me keep a couple of white mice once. I still have their cage at home. You would be very comfortable in it."

"Comfortable in a cage?" Ralph was horrified. "No, thank you."

"Aw, come on—"

"Would you like to be shut up in a cage?" demanded Ralph.

"Well, no, but—"

"Neither would I," said Ralph. "Especially now that I can finally go to the ground floor."

In his disappointment Keith slumped back on the pillows once more. "I guess I knew you really wouldn't want to come," he said. "I understand."

"I sure will hate to see this motorcycle leave," said Ralph, and added hastily, "and you, too, of course."

The boy and the mouse were silent. Both were thinking of their wishes and their regrets that their wishes could not come true.

Keith rolled over on his side and propped his head up on his fist. "Would you like to keep the motorcycle?" he asked.

"Keep it! Me?"

"Sure," said Keith. "I can save up my allowance and buy another one when we get back to Ohio."

"You really mean it?" Ralph could

scarcely contain his excitement. "Keep it for my very own?"

"Of course."

"How come?" Ralph wanted to know.

"I just like to think of you riding it," said Keith. "You know—if you grew up enough to be trusted with a mouse-sized motorcycle, maybe someday I could earn a big one."

The excitement drained out of Ralph. "I can't. I don't have any place to keep it. It's too big to go through the knothole, and I couldn't hide it behind the curtain forever because I've heard that after Labor Day when there aren't so many tourists they take the curtains down to be cleaned."

"That is a problem," agreed Keith. "There must be someplace in a big hotel like this where you could keep a motorcycle."

Ralph sat on the motorcycle thinking as hard as he could. In the closet? He couldn't

get it out when the door was closed. Under the bed? Eventually it would be found.

"How about downstairs?" suggested Keith. "I could carry it down for you before we leave. There must be a good hiding place down there someplace."

"There's that big old clock my ancestor ran up," said Ralph thoughtfully. "Nobody ever cleans under it, but frankly I don't care to have it striking over my head."

Keith thought awhile. "How about that big television set in the lobby?" he asked. "The noise shouldn't bother you because you would only go under it at night when everyone was asleep."

"Yes!" Ralph was excited. "That's a perfect garage. I saw it when I got the aspirin. The legs are just high enough for the motorcycle but not quite high enough for a vacuum cleaner attachment."

"Then it's settled!" said Keith, and then

added rather sternly, Ralph thought, "But first you must ask your mother."

Ralph dismounted and ran to the knot-hole. He was gone several minutes before he returned to announce in triumph, "She says I can keep the motorcycle if I promise to drive carefully and wear my crash helmet every single time I ride it."

"Swell!" Keith was just as excited as Ralph. "When we check out I'll hide it for you while my folks are busy paying the bill."

"I can't thank you enough." Ralph fastened his crash helmet once more. "I never thought I would have a motorcycle of my very own."

Keith lay back on the pillow and smiled at the mouse mounting the motorcycle. "It will be fun thinking of you riding around that big old lobby when I'm back in Ohio this winter going to school. And when the teacher asks us to write a composition about

our summer vacation I can write about meeting a brave mouse named Ralph who rode a little motorcycle. I'll tell about your bringing the aspirin except I'll have to call it a pill because I can't spell *aspirin*. Of course the teacher won't believe it, but she'll probably say I show imagination."

Ralph felt proud to think he was going to be written about in a composition in far-off Ohio. *Pb-pb-b-b-b*. He grabbed his tail, gunned the motor, and took off, heading for the threadbare part of the carpet that made such a good speedway. Round and round he sped, faster and faster until his whiskers blew back and he was filled with the joy of speed. He longed to wave to Keith, but he realized a good driver must keep both paws on the handgrips. He glanced up and noticed that Keith's eyes were closed. The boy had fallen asleep with a smile on his face.

Ralph dragged his heels to brake the motorcycle. Quietly he parked it beside the bed and quietly he removed his crash helmet and hid it behind the curtain. He did not want to disturb the sleeping boy.

Ralph could wait to ride the motorcycle. It was his to keep.

