

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 bath-robe. "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.