

# 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 housekeeper 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 scrabbled 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.