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## ADVENTURE IN THE NIGHT

**W**hen 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.

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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 waggling 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.