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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.