

The fourth-floor window was wide open, and there, on the sill, stood a very young boy. Little Mouse laughed and reached his arms out towards the birds in the tree-tops and the clouds blowing across the sky, as if he longed to be flying with them.

Hanny, the nursery maid, saw all this. She also saw Uncle Scrope with one hand raised behind the small boy's back, waiting. One strong hand, one quick push, and what then?

Hanny rushed forward. With a quick sweep of her arm, she gathered the child back into her apron and lifted him down to the floor.

Scrope blinked. The strange light in his pale eyes died away, as if some wild urge had been halted. He slipped his hand – the one that had been poised behind Mouse's back – casually back into his own pocket.

'Oh,' Scrope drawled, 'it's you. The nursery maid.' He stared at the gravel path far below. 'Long way down, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir. It is,' Hanny replied, trying to calm the fear in her heart. 'I'll take Mouse safely back to the nursery now, sir. I was surprised to find him gone.'

'Good girl. Children do wander so, I hear.' Scrope did not even look at Hanny. 'And get someone to close this window properly. It seems to have become unlatched.'

By the time Hanny reached the nursery, she was shaking all over. She pointed towards the supper tray.

'Eat, please, Mouse.'

The boy peeped up at Hanny out of the corner of his eye. He studied her round, pleasant face and her rosy cheeks. Then, smiling mischievously, he carefully picked up a triangle of buttered bread in his fingers and popped it in his mouth. Then he opened wide to show he was doing what she had asked.

'Oh, Mouse!' Hanny said sadly, while she smiled at the boy, at his soft tufted hair, his bright brown eyes and his slightly sticking-out ears. 'Mouse, what am I going to do about you?'

Only when Mouse was safely in his cot did Hanny dare to think about what she had witnessed. A child like Mouse could fall down a flight of steep marble stairs, or topple from a balcony, or drop from a window so, so quickly. A child like Mouse could slip and trip and crash to his doom so, so easily. A man like Scrope would find it very, very useful if such an accident happened to happen.

Retrieving Information

- 1) Use a dictionary to find the meaning of:
 - a) urge
 - b) poised
- 2) What is Mouse having for supper?
- 3) What time of day are the events in the text happening?

Making Inferences

- 4) Do you think this text is set in the past or nowadays? Why?
- 5) Why do you think Hanny says nothing about what she saw to Uncle Scrope?
- 6) Why might Uncle Scrope want Mouse to have an 'accident'?

Writer's choices

- 7) Why do you think the writer opens the text with a description of the birds and the trees and clouds?
- 8) Why do you think the author has chosen to give Uncle Scrope "pale eyes" and Mouse "bright brown eyes"?

Challenge question (extended answer)

- 9) Do you think Mouse comes from a rich or a poor family? Explain why, using evidence from the text.