


THE SCENTED PEACH EDITION



ROALD DAHL

Illustrated by
Quentin Blake

A whimsical illustration by Quentin Blake showing a young boy in a white shirt and shorts standing on a large, glowing orange peach. He is looking up at a tall, green, insect-like creature with long legs and antennae. Other smaller, colorful creatures are also on the peach. The background is a dark blue night sky with white stars. A yellow paper airplane is flying in the sky, leaving a thin white trail.

JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH

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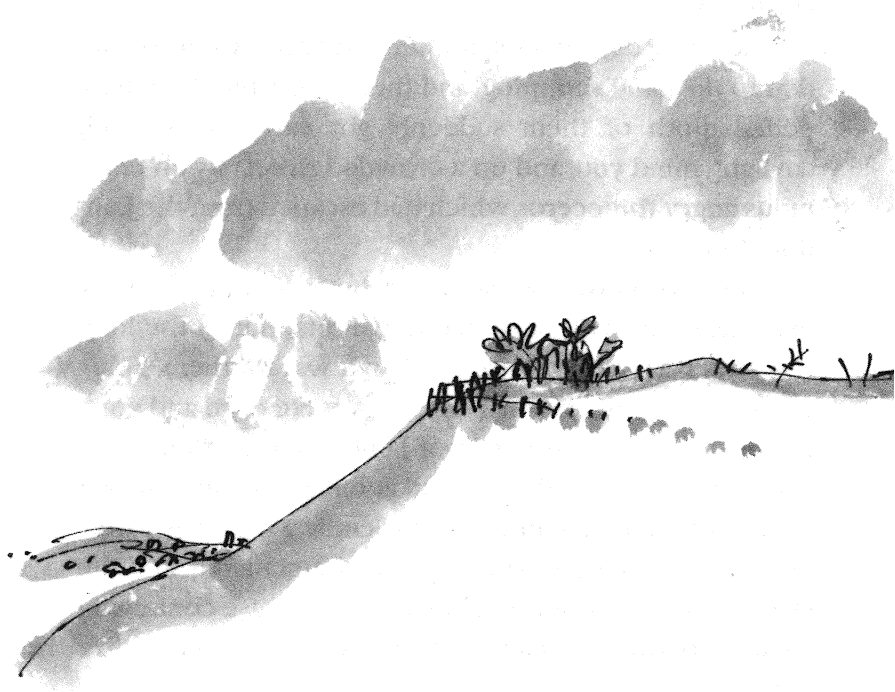
Until he was four years old, James Henry Trotter had had a happy life. He lived peacefully with his mother and father in a beautiful house beside the sea. There were always plenty of other children for him to play with, and there was the sandy beach for him to run about on, and the ocean to paddle in. It was the perfect life for a small boy.

Then, one day, James's mother and father went to London to do some shopping, and there a terrible thing happened. Both of them suddenly got eaten up (in full daylight, mind you, and on a crowded street) by an enormous angry rhinoceros which had escaped from the London Zoo.

Now this, as you can well imagine, was a rather nasty experience for two such gentle parents. But in the long run it was far nastier for James than it was for them. *Their* troubles were all over in a jiffy. They were dead and gone in thirty-five seconds flat. Poor James, on the other hand, was still very much alive, and all at once he found himself alone and frightened in a vast unfriendly world. The lovely house by the seaside had to be sold immediately, and the little boy, carrying nothing but a small suitcase containing a pair of pajamas and a toothbrush, was sent away to live with his two aunts.

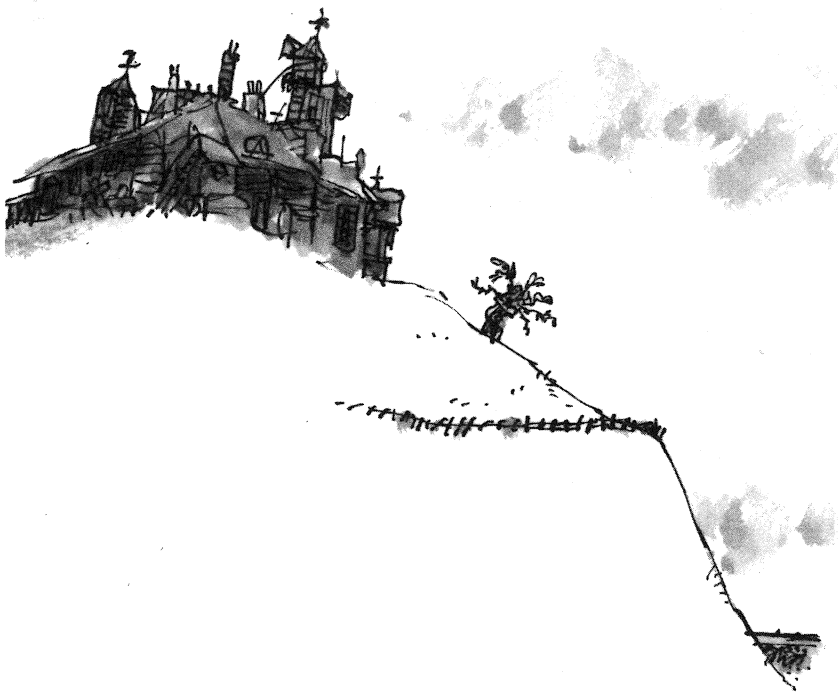
Their names were Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, and I am sorry to say that they were both really horrible people. They were selfish and lazy and cruel, and right from the beginning they started beating poor James for almost no reason at all. They never called him by his real name, but always referred to him as “you disgusting little beast” or “you filthy nuisance” or “you miserable creature,” and they certainly never gave him any toys to play with or any picture books to look at. His room was as bare as a prison cell.

They lived—Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker, and now James as well—in a queer ramshackle house on the top of a high hill in the south of England. The hill was so high that



from almost anywhere in the garden James could look down and see for miles and miles across a marvelous landscape of woods and fields; and on a very clear day, if he looked in the right direction, he could see a tiny gray dot far away on the horizon, which was the house that he used to live in with his beloved mother and father. And just beyond that, he could see the ocean itself—a long thin streak of blackish-blue, like a line of ink, beneath the rim of the sky.

But James was never allowed to go down off the top of that hill. Neither Aunt Sponge nor Aunt Spiker could ever be bothered to take him out herself, not even for a



small walk or a picnic, and he certainly wasn't permitted to go alone. "The nasty little beast will only get into mischief if he goes out of the garden," Aunt Spiker had said. And terrible punishments were promised him, such as being locked up in the cellar with the rats for a week, if he even so much as dared to climb over the fence.

The garden, which covered the whole of the top of the hill, was large and desolate, and the only tree in the entire place (apart from a clump of dirty old laurel bushes at the far end) was an ancient peach tree that never gave any peaches. There was no swing, no seesaw, no sand pit, and no other children were ever invited to



come up the hill to play with poor James. There wasn't so much as a dog or a cat around to keep him company. And as time went on, he became sadder and sadder, and more and more lonely, and he used to spend hours every day standing at the bottom of the garden, gazing wistfully at the lovely but forbidden world of woods and fields and ocean that was spread out below him like a magic carpet.

2

AFTER JAMES HENRY TROTTER had been living with his aunts for three whole years there came a morning when something rather peculiar happened to him. And this thing, which as I say was only *rather* peculiar, soon caused a second thing to happen which was *very* peculiar. And then the *very* peculiar thing, in its own turn, caused a really *fantastically* peculiar thing to occur.

It all started on a blazing hot day in the middle of summer. Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker, and James were all out in the garden. James had been put to work, as usual. This time he was chopping wood for the kitchen stove. Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker were sitting comfortably in deck-chairs nearby, sipping tall glasses of fizzy lemonade and watching him to see that he didn't stop work for one moment.

Aunt Sponge was enormously fat and very short. She had small piggy eyes, a sunken mouth, and one of those

white flabby faces that looked exactly as though it had been boiled. She was like a great white soggy overboiled cabbage. Aunt Spiker, on the other hand, was lean and tall and bony, and she wore steel-rimmed spectacles that fixed onto the end of her nose with a clip. She had a screeching voice and long wet narrow lips, and whenever she got angry or excited, little flecks of spit would come shooting out of her mouth as she talked. And there they sat, these two ghastly hags, sipping their drinks, and every now and again screaming at James to chop faster and faster. They also talked about themselves, each one



saying how beautiful she thought she was. Aunt Sponge had a long-handled mirror on her lap, and she kept picking it up and gazing at her own hideous face.

*"I look and smell," Aunt Sponge declared, "as lovely as a rose!
Just feast your eyes upon my face, observe my shapely nose!
Behold my heavenly silky locks!
And if I take off both my socks
You'll see my dainty toes."
"But don't forget," Aunt Spiker cried, "how much your tummy shows!"*

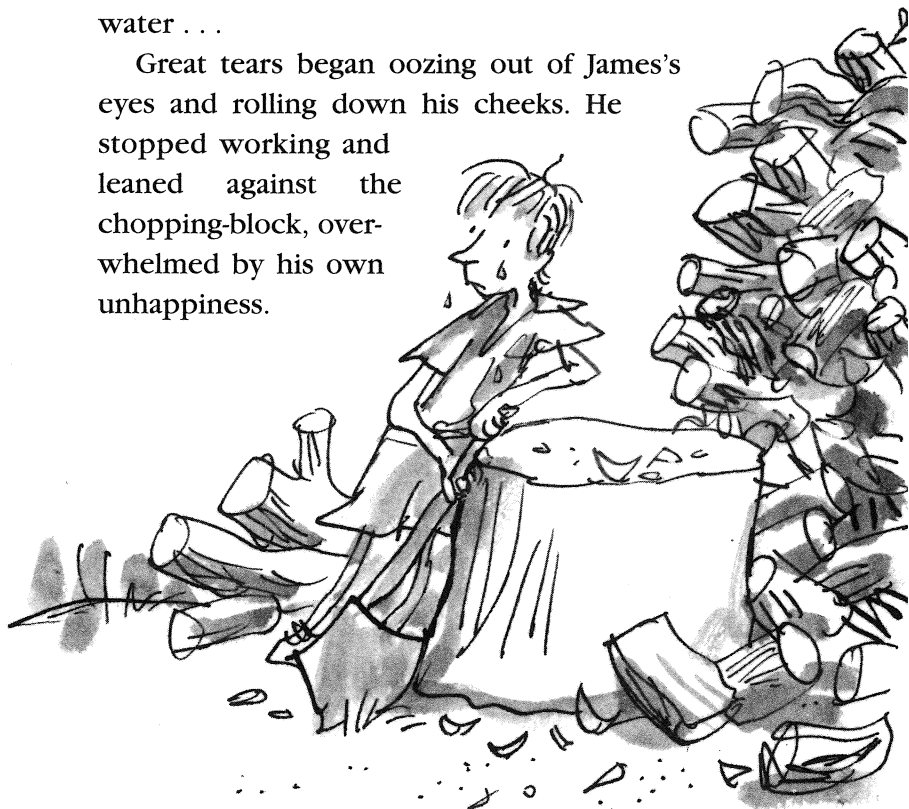
*Aunt Sponge went red. Aunt Spiker said, "My sweet, you cannot win,
Behold my gorgeous curvy shape, my teeth, my charming grin!
Oh, beauteous me! How I adore
My radiant looks! And please ignore
The pimple on my chin."
"My dear old trout!" Aunt Sponge cried out,
"You're only bones and skin!"*

*"Such loveliness as I possess can only truly shine
In Hollywood!" Aunt Sponge declared. "Oh, wouldn't that be fine!
I'd capture all the nations' hearts!
They'd give me all the leading parts!
The stars would all resign!"*

"I think you'd make," Aunt Spiker said, "a lovely Frankenstein."

Poor James was still slaving away at the chopping-block. The heat was terrible. He was sweating all over. His arm was aching. The chopper was a large blunt thing far too heavy for a small boy to use. And as he worked, James began thinking about all the other children in the world and what they might be doing at this moment. Some would be riding tricycles in their gardens. Some would be walking in cool woods and picking bunches of wild flowers. And all the little friends whom he used to know would be down by the seaside, playing in the wet sand and splashing around in the water . . .

Great tears began oozing out of James's eyes and rolling down his cheeks. He stopped working and leaned against the chopping-block, overwhelmed by his own unhappiness.



"What's the matter with you?" Aunt Spiker screeched, glaring at him over the top of her steel spectacles.

James began to cry.

"Stop that immediately and get on with your work, you nasty little beast!" Aunt Sponge ordered.

"Oh, Auntie Sponge!" James cried out. "And Auntie Spiker! Couldn't we all—*please*—just for once—go down to the seaside on the bus? It isn't very far—and I feel so hot and awful and lonely . . ."

"Why, you lazy good-for-nothing brute!" Aunt Spiker shouted.

"Beat him!" cried Aunt Sponge.

"I certainly will!" Aunt Spiker snapped. She glared at James, and James looked back at her with large frightened eyes. "I shall beat you later on in the day when I don't feel so hot," she said. "And now get out of my sight, you disgusting little worm, and give me some peace!"

James turned and ran. He ran off as fast as he could to the far end of the garden and hid himself behind that clump of dirty old laurel bushes that we mentioned earlier on. Then he covered his face with his hands and began to cry and cry.

3

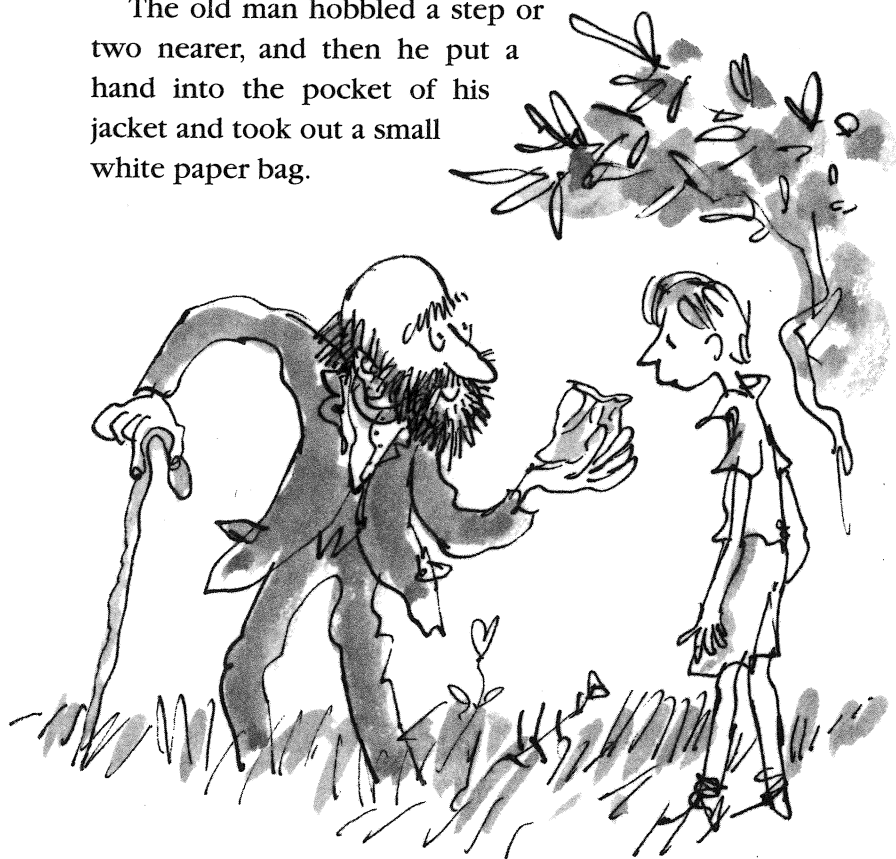
IT WAS AT THIS POINT that the first thing of all, the *rather* peculiar thing that led to so many other *much* more peculiar things, happened to him.

For suddenly, just behind him, James heard a rustling of leaves, and he turned around and saw an old man in a crazy dark-green suit emerging from the bushes. He was a very small old man, but he had a huge bald head and a face that was covered all over with bristly black whiskers. He stopped when he was about three yards away, and he stood there leaning on his stick and staring hard at James.

When he spoke, his voice was very slow and creaky. "Come closer to me, little boy," he said, beckoning to James with a finger. "Come right up close to me and I will show you something *wonderful*."

James was too frightened to move.

The old man hobbled a step or two nearer, and then he put a hand into the pocket of his jacket and took out a small white paper bag.



"You see this?" he whispered, waving the bag gently to and fro in front of James's face. "You know what this is, my dear? You know what's inside this little bag?"

Then he came nearer still, leaning forward and pushing his face so close to James that James could feel breath blowing on his cheeks. The breath smelled musty and stale and slightly mildewed, like air in an old cellar.

"Take a look, my dear," he said, opening the bag and tilting it toward James. Inside it, James could see a mass of tiny green things that looked like little stones or crystals, each one about the size of a grain of rice. They were extraordinarily beautiful, and there was a strange brightness about them, a sort of luminous quality that made them glow and sparkle in the most wonderful way.

"Listen to them!" the old man whispered. "Listen to them move!"

James stared into the bag, and sure enough there was a faint rustling sound coming up from inside it, and then he noticed that all the thousands of little green things were slowly, very very slowly stirring about and moving over each other as though they were alive.

"There's more power and magic in those things in there than in all the rest of the world put together," the old man said softly.

"But—but—what *are* they?" James murmured, finding his voice at last. "Where do they come from?"

"Ah-ha," the old man whispered. "You'd never guess that!" He was crouching a little now and pushing his face still closer and closer to James until the tip of his long nose was actually touching the skin on James's forehead. Then suddenly he jumped back and began waving his

stick madly in the air. "Crocodile tongues!" he cried. "One thousand long slimy crocodile tongues boiled up in the skull of a dead witch for twenty days and nights with the eyeballs of a lizard! Add the fingers of a young monkey, the gizzard of a pig, the beak of a green parrot, the juice of a porcupine, and three spoonfuls of sugar. Stew for another week, and then let the moon do the rest!"

All at once, he pushed the white paper bag into James's hands, and said, "Here! You take it! It's yours!"

4

JAMES HENRY TROTTER stood there clutching the bag and staring at the old man.

"And now," the old man said, "all you've got to do is this. Take a large jug of water, and pour all the little green things into it. Then, very slowly, one by one, add ten hairs from your own head. That sets them off! It gets them going! In a couple of minutes the water will begin to froth and bubble furiously, and as soon as that happens you must quickly drink it all down, the whole jugful, in one gulp. And then, my dear, you will feel it churning and boiling in your stomach, and steam will start coming out of your mouth, and immediately after that, *marvelous* things will start happening to you, *fabulous*, *unbelievable* things—and you will never be miserable again in your life. Because you *are* miserable, aren't you? You needn't tell me! I know *all* about it! Now, off you go and

do exactly as I say. And don't whisper a word of this to those two horrible aunts of yours! Not a word! And don't let those green things in there get away from you either! Because if they do escape, then they will be working their magic upon somebody else instead of upon *you*! And that isn't what you want at all, is it, my dear? *Whoever they meet first, be it bug, insect, animal, or tree, that will be the one who gets the full power of their magic!* So hold the bag tight! Don't tear the paper! Off you go! Hurry up! Don't wait! Now's the time! Hurry!"

With that, the old man turned away and disappeared into the bushes.

5

THE NEXT MOMENT, James was running back toward the house as fast as he could go. He would do it all in the kitchen, he told himself—if only he could get in there without Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker seeing him. He was terribly excited. He flew through the long grass and the stinging-nettles, not caring whether he got stung or not on his bare knees, and in the distance he could see Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker sitting in their chairs with their backs toward him. He swerved away from them so as to go around the other side of the house, but then suddenly, just as he was passing underneath the old peach tree that stood in the middle of the garden, his foot slipped and he fell flat on his face in the grass. The paper bag burst open



as it hit the ground and the thousands of tiny green things were scattered in all directions.

James immediately picked himself up onto his hands and knees and started searching around for his precious

treasures. *But what was this?* They were all sinking into the soil! He could actually see them wriggling and twisting as they burrowed their way downward into the hard earth, and at once he reached out a hand to pick some of them up before it was too late, but they disappeared right under his fingers. He went after some others, and the same thing happened! He began scrabbling around frantically in an effort to catch hold of those that were left, but they were too quick for him. Each time the tips of his fingers were just about to touch them, they vanished into the earth! And soon, in the space of only a few seconds, every single one of them had gone!

James felt like crying. He would never get them back now—they were lost, lost, lost forever.

But where had they gone to? And why in the world had they been so eager to push down into the earth like that? What were they after? There was nothing down *there*. Nothing except the roots of the old peach tree . . . and a whole lot of earthworms and centipedes and insects living in the soil.

But what was it that the old man had said? *Whoever they meet first, be it bug, insect, animal, or tree, that will be the one who gets the full power of their magic!*

Good heavens, thought James. What is going to happen in that case if they *do* meet an earthworm? Or a centipede? Or a spider? And what if they *do* go into the roots of the peach tree?

“Get up at once, you lazy little beast!” a voice was suddenly shouting in James’s ear. James glanced up and saw Aunt Spiker standing over him, grim and tall and bony, glaring at him through her steel-rimmed spectacles. “Get

back over there immediately and finish chopping up those logs!" she ordered.

Aunt Sponge, fat and pulpy as a jellyfish, came waddling up behind her sister to see what was going on. "Why don't we just lower the boy down the well in a bucket and leave him there for the night?" she suggested. "That ought to teach him not to laze around like this the whole day long."

"That's a very good wheeze, my dear Sponge. But let's make him finish chopping up the wood first. Be off with you at once, you hideous brat, and do some work!"

Slowly, sadly, poor James got up off the ground and went back to the woodpile. Oh, if only he hadn't slipped and fallen and dropped that precious bag. All hope of a happier life had gone completely now. Today and tomorrow and the next day and all the other days as well would be nothing but punishment and pain, unhappiness and despair.

He picked up the chopper and was just about to start chopping away again when he heard a shout behind him that made him stop and turn.

6

"SPONGE! SPONGE! Come here at once and look at this!"

"At what?"

"It's a peach!" Aunt Spiker was shouting.

"A what?"



"A peach! Right up there on the highest branch! Can't you see it?"

"I think you must be mistaken, my dear Spiker. That miserable tree *never* has any peaches on it."

"There's one on it now, Sponge! You look for yourself!"

"You're teasing me, Spiker. You're making my mouth

water on purpose when there's nothing to put into it. Why, that tree's never even had a *blossom* on it, let alone a peach. Right up on the highest branch, you say? I can't see a thing. Very funny . . . Ha, ha . . . *Good gracious* me! Well, *I'll be blowed!* There really *is* a peach up there!"

"A nice big one, too!" Aunt Spiker said.

"A beauty, a beauty!" Aunt Sponge cried out.

At this point, James slowly put down his chopper and turned and looked across at the two women, who were standing underneath the peach tree.

Something is about to happen, he told himself. *Something peculiar is about to happen any moment*. He hadn't the faintest idea what it might be, but he could feel it in his bones that something was going to happen soon. He could feel it in the air around him . . . in the sudden stillness that had fallen upon the garden. . . .

James tiptoed a little closer to the tree. The aunts were not talking now. They were just standing there, staring at the peach. There was not a sound anywhere, not even a breath of wind, and overhead the sun blazed down upon them out of a deep blue sky.

"It looks ripe to me," Aunt Spiker said, breaking the silence.

"Then why don't we eat it?" Aunt Sponge suggested, licking her thick lips. "We can have half each. Hey, you! James! Come over here at once and climb this tree!"

James came running over.

"I want you to pick that peach up there on the highest branch," Aunt Sponge went on. "Can you see it?"

"Yes, Auntie Sponge, I can see it!"

"And don't you dare to eat any of it yourself. Your Aunt Spiker and I are going to have it between us right here and now, half each. Get on with you! Up you go!"

James crossed over to the tree trunk.

"Stop!" Aunt Spiker said quickly. "Hold everything!" She was staring up into the branches with her mouth wide open and her eyes bulging as though she had seen a ghost. "*Look!*" she said. "*Look, Sponge, look!*"

"What's the matter with you?" Aunt Sponge demanded.

"It's *growing!*" Aunt Spiker cried. "It's getting bigger and bigger!"

"What is?"

"The peach, of course!"

"You're joking!"

"Well, look for yourself!"

"But my dear Spiker, that's perfectly ridiculous. That's impossible. That's—that's—that's—Now, wait *just* a minute—No—No—that can't be right—No—Yes—Great Scott! The thing really *is* growing!"

"It's nearly twice as big already!" Aunt Spiker shouted.

"It can't be true!"

"It *is* true!"

"It must be a miracle!"

"Watch it! Watch it!"

"I *am* watching it!"

"Great Heavens alive!" Aunt Spiker yelled. "I can actually see the thing bulging and swelling before my very eyes!"

THE TWO WOMEN and the small boy stood absolutely still on the grass underneath the tree, gazing up at this extraordinary fruit. James's little face was glowing with excitement, his eyes were as big and bright as two stars. He could see the peach swelling larger and larger as clearly as if it were a balloon being blown up.

In half a minute, it was the size of a melon!

In another half-minute, it was *twice* as big again!

"Just *look* at it growing!" Aunt Spiker cried.

"Will it ever stop!" Aunt Sponge shouted, waving her fat arms and starting to dance around in circles.

And now it was so big it looked like an enormous butter-colored pumpkin dangling from the top of the tree.

"Get away from that tree trunk, you stupid boy!" Aunt Spiker yelled. "The slightest shake and I'm sure it'll fall off! It must weigh twenty or thirty pounds at least!"

The branch that the peach was growing upon was beginning to bend over further and further because of the weight.

"Stand back!" Aunt Sponge shouted. "It's coming down! The branch is going to break!"

But the branch didn't break. It simply bent over more and more as the peach got heavier and heavier.

And still it went on growing.

In another minute, this mammoth fruit was as large and round and fat as Aunt Sponge herself, and probably just as heavy.

"It *has* to stop now!" Aunt Spiker yelled. "It can't go on forever!"

But it didn't stop.

Soon it was the size of a small car, and reached halfway to the ground.

Both aunts were now hopping around and around the tree, clapping their hands and shouting all sorts of silly things in their excitement.

"Hallelujah!" Aunt Spiker shouted. "What a peach! What a peach!"

"Terrifico!" Aunt Sponge cried out, "Magnifico! Splendifico! And what a meal!"

"It's still growing!"

"I know! I know!"

As for James, he was so spellbound by the whole thing that he could only stand and stare and murmur quietly to himself, "Oh, isn't it beautiful. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Shut up, you little twerp!" Aunt Spiker snapped, happening to overhear him. "It's none of your business!"

"That's right," Aunt Sponge declared. "It's got nothing to do with you whatsoever! Keep out of it!"

"Look!" Aunt Spiker shouted. "It's growing faster than ever now! It's speeding up!"

"I see it, Spiker! I do! I do!"

Bigger and bigger grew the peach, bigger and bigger and bigger.

Then at last, when it had become nearly as tall as the tree that it was growing on, as tall and wide, in fact, as a small house, the bottom part of it gently touched the ground—and there it rested.



"It can't fall off now!" Aunt Sponge shouted.

"It's stopped growing!" Aunt Spiker cried.

"No, it hasn't!"

"Yes, it has!"

"It's slowing down, Spiker, it's slowing down! But it hasn't stopped yet! You watch it!"

There was a pause.

"It has now!"

"I believe you're right."

"Do you think it's safe to touch it?"

"I don't know. We'd better be careful."

Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker began walking slowly around the peach, inspecting it very cautiously from all sides. They were like a couple of hunters who had just shot an elephant and were not quite sure whether it was dead or alive. And the massive round fruit towered over them so high that they looked like midgets from another world beside it.

The skin of the peach was very beautiful—a rich buttery yellow with patches of brilliant pink and red. Aunt Sponge advanced cautiously and touched it with the tip of one finger. "It's ripe!" she cried. "It's just perfect! Now, see here, Spiker. Why don't we go and get us a shovel right away and dig out a great big hunk of it for you and me to eat?"

"No," Aunt Spiker said. "Not yet."

"Whyever not?"

"Because I say so."

"But I can't *wait* to eat some!" Aunt Sponge cried out. She was watering at the mouth now and a thin trickle of spit was running down one side of her chin.

"My dear Sponge," Aunt Spiker said slowly, winking at her sister and smiling a sly, thin-lipped smile. "There's a pile of money to be made out of this if only we can handle it right. You wait and see."

8

THE NEWS THAT A PEACH almost as big as a house had suddenly appeared in someone's garden spread like wild-fire across the countryside, and the next day a stream of people came scrambling up the steep hill to gaze upon this marvel.

Quickly, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker called in carpenters and had them build a strong fence around the peach to save it from the crowd; and at the same time, these two crafty women stationed themselves at the front gate with a large bunch of tickets and started charging everyone for coming in.

"Roll up! Roll up!" Aunt Spiker yelled. "Only one shilling to see the giant peach!"

"Half price for children under six weeks old!" Aunt Sponge shouted.

"One at a time, please! Don't push! Don't push! You're all going to get in!"

"Hey, you! Come back, there! You haven't paid!"

By lunchtime, the whole place was a seething mass of men, women, and children all pushing and shoving to get a glimpse of this miraculous fruit. Helicopters were land-



ing like wasps all over the hill, and out of them poured swarms of newspaper reporters, cameramen, and men from the television companies.

"It'll cost you double to bring in a camera!" Aunt Spiker shouted.

"All right! All right!" they answered. "We don't care!" And the money came rolling into the pockets of the two greedy aunts.

But while all this excitement was going on outside, poor James was forced to stay locked in his bedroom, peeping through the bars of his window at the crowds below.

"The disgusting little brute will only get in everyone's way if we let him wander about," Aunt Spiker had said early that morning.

"Oh, *please!*" he had begged. "I haven't met any other children for years and years and there are going to be lots of them down there for me to play with. And perhaps I could help you with the tickets."

"Cut it out!" Aunt Sponge had snapped. "Your Aunt Spiker and I are about to become millionaires, and the last thing we want is the likes of you messing things up and getting in the way."

Later, when the evening of the first day came and the people had all gone home, the aunts unlocked James's door and ordered him to go outside and pick up all the banana skins and orange peel and bits of paper that the crowd had left behind.

"Could I please have something to eat first?" he asked. "I haven't had a thing all day."

"No!" they shouted, kicking him out the door. "We're too busy to make food! We are counting our money!"

"But it's dark!" cried James.

"Get out!" they yelled. "And stay out until you've cleaned up all the mess!" The door slammed. The key turned in the lock.

9

HUNGRY AND TREMBLING, James stood alone out in the open, wondering what to do. The night was all around him now, and high overhead a wild white moon was riding in the sky. There was not a sound, not a movement anywhere.

Most people—and especially small children—are often quite scared of being out of doors alone in the moonlight. Everything is so deadly quiet, and the shadows are so long and black, and they keep turning into strange shapes that seem to move as you look at them, and the slightest little snap of a twig makes you jump.

James felt exactly like that now. He stared straight ahead with large frightened eyes, hardly daring to breathe. Not far away, in the middle of the garden, he could see the giant peach towering over everything else. Surely it was even bigger tonight than ever before? And what a dazzling sight it was! The moonlight was shining and glinting on its great curving sides, turning them to

crystal and silver. It looked like a tremendous silver ball lying there in the grass, silent, mysterious, and wonderful.

And then all at once, little shivers of excitement started running over the skin on James's back.

Something else, he told himself, something stranger than ever this time, is about to happen to me again soon. He was sure of it. He could feel it coming.

He looked around him, wondering what on earth it was going to be. The garden lay soft and silver in the moonlight. The grass was wet with dew and a million dewdrops were sparkling and twinkling like diamonds around his feet. And now suddenly, the whole place, the whole garden, seemed to be *alive* with magic.

Almost without knowing what he was doing, as though drawn by some powerful magnet, James Henry Trotter started walking slowly toward the giant peach. He climbed over the fence that surrounded it, and stood directly beneath it, staring up at its great bulging sides. He put out a hand and touched it gently with the tip of one finger. It felt soft and warm and slightly furry, like the skin of a baby mouse. He moved a step closer and rubbed his cheek lightly against the soft skin. And then suddenly, while he was doing this, he happened to notice that right beside him and below him, close to the ground, there was a hole in the side of the peach.



IT WAS QUITE a large hole, the sort of thing an animal about the size of a fox might have made.

James knelt down in front of it and poked his head and shoulders inside.

He crawled in.

He kept on crawling.

This isn't just a hole, he thought excitedly. It's a tunnel!

The tunnel was damp and murky, and all around him there was the curious bittersweet smell of fresh peach. The floor was soggy under his knees, the walls were wet and sticky, and peach juice was dripping from the ceiling. James opened his mouth and caught some of it on his tongue. It tasted delicious.

He was crawling uphill now, as though the tunnel were leading straight toward the very center of the gigantic fruit. Every few seconds he paused and took a bite out of the wall. The peach flesh was sweet and juicy, and marvelously refreshing.

He crawled on for several more yards, and then suddenly—*bang*—the top of his head bumped into something extremely hard blocking his way. He glanced up. In front of him there was a solid wall that seemed at first as though it were made of wood. He touched it with his fingers. It certainly felt like wood, except that it was very jagged and full of deep grooves.

"Good heavens!" he said. "I know what this is! I've come to the stone in the middle of the peach!"

Then he noticed that there was a small door cut into the face of the peach stone. He gave a push. It swung open. He crawled through it, and before he had time to glance up and see where he was, he heard a voice saying, "*Look who's here!*" And another one said, "*We've been waiting for you!*"



James stopped and stared at the speakers, his face white with horror.

He started to stand up, but his knees were shaking so much he had to sit down again on the floor. He glanced behind him, thinking he could bolt back into the tunnel the way he had come, but the doorway had disappeared. There was now only a solid brown wall behind him.

JAMES'S LARGE FRIGHTENED EYES traveled slowly around the room.

The creatures, some sitting on chairs, others reclining on a sofa, were all watching him intently.

Creatures?

Or were they insects?

An insect is usually something rather small, is it not? A grasshopper, for example, is an insect.

So what would you call it if you saw a grasshopper as



large as a dog? As large as a *large* dog. You could hardly call *that* an insect, could you?

There was an Old-Green-Grasshopper as large as a large dog sitting on a stool directly across the room from James now.

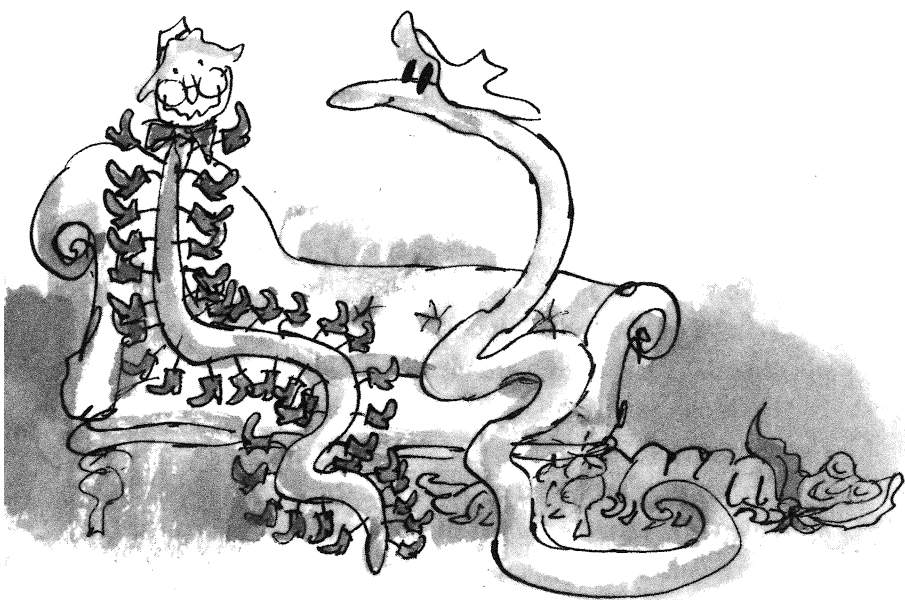
And next to the Old-Green-Grasshopper, there was an enormous Spider.

And next to the Spider, there was a giant Ladybug with nine black spots on her scarlet shell.

Each of these three was squatting upon a magnificent chair.

On a sofa nearby, reclining comfortably in curled-up positions, there was a Centipede and an Earthworm.

On the floor over in the far corner, there was something thick and white that looked as though it might be a



Silkworm. But it was sleeping soundly and nobody was paying any attention to it.

Every one of these "creatures" was at least as big as James himself, and in the strange greenish light that shone down from somewhere in the ceiling, they were absolutely terrifying to behold.

"I'm hungry!" the Spider announced suddenly, staring hard at James.

"*I'm* famished!" the Old-Green-Grasshopper said.

"So am *I*!" the Ladybug cried.

The Centipede sat up a little straighter on the sofa. "*Everyone's* famished!" he said. "We need food!"

Four pairs of round black glassy eyes were all fixed upon James.

The Centipede made a wriggling movement with his body as though he were about to glide off the sofa—but he didn't.

There was a long pause—and a long silence.

The Spider (who happened to be a female spider) opened her mouth and ran a long black tongue delicately over her lips. "Aren't *you* hungry?" she asked suddenly, leaning forward and addressing herself to James.

Poor James was backed up against the far wall, shivering with fright and much too terrified to answer.

"What's the matter with you?" the Old-Green-Grasshopper asked. "You look positively ill!"

"He looks as though he's going to faint any second," the Centipede said.

"Oh, my goodness, the poor thing!" the Ladybug cried. "I do believe he thinks it's *him* that we are wanting to eat!"

There was a roar of laughter from all sides.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" they said. "What an awful thought!"

"You mustn't be frightened," the Ladybug said kindly. "We wouldn't *dream* of hurting you. You are one of *us* now, didn't you know that? You are one of the crew. We're all in the same boat."

"We've been waiting for you all day long," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said. "We thought you were never going to turn up. I'm glad you made it."

"So cheer up, my boy, cheer up!" the Centipede said. "And meanwhile I wish you'd come over here and give me a hand with these boots. It takes me *hours* to get them all off by myself."

12

JAMES DECIDED that this was most certainly not a time to be disagreeable, so he crossed the room to where the Centipede was sitting and knelt down beside him.

"Thank you so much," the Centipede said. "You are very kind."

"You have a lot of boots," James murmured.

"I have a lot of legs," the Centipede answered proudly. "And a lot of feet. One hundred, to be exact."

"*There* he goes again!" the Earthworm cried, speaking for the first time. "He simply cannot stop telling lies about his legs! He doesn't have anything *like* a hundred of them! He's only got forty-two! The trouble is that most people don't bother to count them. They just take his word."

And anyway, there is nothing *marvelous*, you know, Centipede, about having a lot of legs."

"Poor fellow," the Centipede said, whispering in James's ear. "He's blind. He can't see how splendid I look."

"In my opinion," the Earthworm said, "the *really* mar-



velous thing is to have no legs at all and to be able to walk just the same."

"You call that *walking*!" cried the Centipede. "You're a *slitherer*, that's all you are! You just *slither* along!"

"I glide," said the Earthworm primly.

"You are a slimy beast," answered the Centipede.

"I am *not* a slimy beast," the Earthworm said. "I am a useful and much loved creature. Ask any gardener you like. And as for you . . ."

"I am a pest!" the Centipede announced, grinning broadly and looking round the room for approval.

"He is so proud of that," the Ladybug said, smiling at James. "Though for the life of me I cannot understand why."

"I am the only pest in this room!" cried the Centipede, still grinning away. "Unless you count Old-Green-Grasshopper over there. But he is long past it now. He is too old to be a pest any more."

The Old-Green-Grasshopper turned his huge black eyes upon the Centipede and gave him a withering look. "Young fellow," he said, speaking in a deep, slow, scornful voice, "I have never been a pest in my life. I am a musician."

"Hear, hear!" said the Ladybug.

"James," the Centipede said. "Your names *is* James, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, James, have you ever in your life seen such a marvelous colossal Centipede as me?"

"I certainly haven't," James answered. "How on earth did you get to be like that?"

"*Very* peculiar," the Centipede said. "*Very, very* peculiar indeed. Let me tell you what happened. I was messing

about in the garden under the old peach tree and suddenly a funny little green thing came wriggling past my nose. Bright green it was, and extraordinarily beautiful, and it looked like some kind of a tiny stone or crystal . . .”

“Oh, but I know what that was!” cried James.

“It happened to me, too!” said the Ladybug.

“And me!” Miss Spider said. “Suddenly there were little green things everywhere! The soil was full of them!”

“I actually swallowed one!” the Earthworm declared proudly.

“So did I!” the Ladybug said.

“I swallowed three!” the Centipede cried. “But who’s telling this story anyway? Don’t interrupt!”

“It’s too late to tell stories now,” the Old-Green-Grasshopper announced. “It’s time to go to sleep.”

“I refuse to sleep in my boots!” the Centipede cried. “How many more are there to come off, James?”

“I think I’ve done about twenty so far,” James told him.

“Then that leaves eighty to go,” the Centipede said.

“*Twenty-two*, not *eighty*!” shrieked the Earthworm. “He’s lying again.”

The Centipede roared with laughter.

“Stop pulling the Earthworm’s leg,” the Ladybug said.

This sent the Centipede into hysterics. “Pulling his *leg*!” he cried, wriggling with glee and pointing at the Earthworm. “Which leg am I pulling? You tell me that?”

James decided that he rather liked the Centipede. He was obviously a rascal, but what a change it was to hear somebody laughing once in a while. He had never heard Aunt Sponge or Aunt Spiker laughing aloud in all the time he had been with them.

"We really *must* get some sleep," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said. "We've got a tough day ahead of us tomorrow. So would you be kind enough, Miss Spider, to make the beds?"

13

A FEW MINUTES LATER, Miss Spider had made the first bed. It was hanging from the ceiling, suspended by a rope of threads at either end so that actually it looked more like a hammock than a bed. But it was a magnificent affair, and the stuff that it was made of shimmered like silk in the pale light.

"I do hope you'll find it comfortable," Miss Spider said to the Old-Green-Grasshopper. "I made it as soft and silky as I possibly could. I spun it with gossamer. That's a much better quality thread than the one I use for my own web."

"Thank you so much, my dear lady," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said, climbing into the hammock. "Ah, this is just what I needed. Good night, everybody. Good night."

Then Miss Spider spun the next hammock, and the Ladybug got in.

After that, she spun a long one for the Centipede, and an even longer one for the Earthworm.

"And how do you like *your* bed?" she said to James when it came to his turn. "Hard or soft?"

"I like it soft, thank you very much," James answered.

"For goodness' sake stop staring round the room and

get on with my boots!" the Centipede said. "You and I are never going to get any sleep at this rate! And kindly line them up neatly in pairs as you take them off. Don't just throw them over your shoulder."

James worked away frantically on the Centipede's boots. Each one had laces that had to be untied and loosened before it could be pulled off, and to make matters worse, all the laces were tied up in the most complicated knots that had to be unpicked with fingernails. It was just awful. It took about two hours. And by the time James had pulled off the last boot of all and had lined them up in a row on the floor—twenty-one pairs altogether—the Centipede was fast asleep.

"Wake up, Centipede," whispered James, giving him a gentle dig in the stomach. "It's time for bed."

"Thank you, my dear child," the Centipede said, opening his eyes. Then he got down off the sofa and ambled across the room and crawled into his hammock. James got into his own hammock—and oh, how soft and comfortable it was compared with the hard bare boards that his aunts had always made him sleep upon at home.

"Lights out," said the Centipede drowsily.

Nothing happened.

"Turn out the light!" he called, raising his voice.

James glanced round the room, wondering which of the others he might be talking to, but they were all asleep. The Old-Green-Grasshopper was snoring loudly through his nose. The Ladybug was making whistling noises as she breathed, and the Earthworm was coiled up like a spring at one end of his hammock, wheezing and blowing through

his open mouth. As for Miss Spider, she had made a lovely web for herself across one corner of the room, and James could see her crouching right in the very center of it, mumbling softly in her dreams.

"I said turn out the light!" shouted the Centipede angrily.

"Are you talking to me?" James asked him.

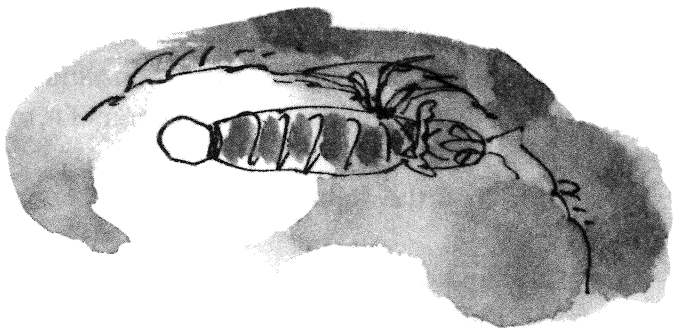
"Of course I'm not talking to you, you ass!" the Centipede answered. "That crazy Glow-worm has gone to sleep with her light on!"

For the first time since entering the room, James glanced up at the ceiling—and there he saw a most extraordinary sight. Something that looked like a gigantic fly without wings (it was at least three feet long) was standing upside down upon its six legs in the middle of the ceiling, and the tail end of this creature seemed to be literally on fire. A brilliant greenish light as bright as the brightest electric bulb was shining out of its tail and lighting up the whole room.

"Is *that* a Glow-worm?" asked James, staring at the light. "It doesn't look like a worm of any sort to me."

"Of course it's a Glow-worm," the Centipede answered. "At least that's what *she* calls herself. Although actually you are quite right. She isn't really a worm at all. Glow-worms are never worms. They are simply lady fireflies without wings. Wake up, you lazy beast!"

But the Glow-worm didn't stir, so the Centipede reached out of his hammock and picked up one of his boots from the floor. "Put out that wretched light!" he shouted, hurling the boot up at the ceiling.

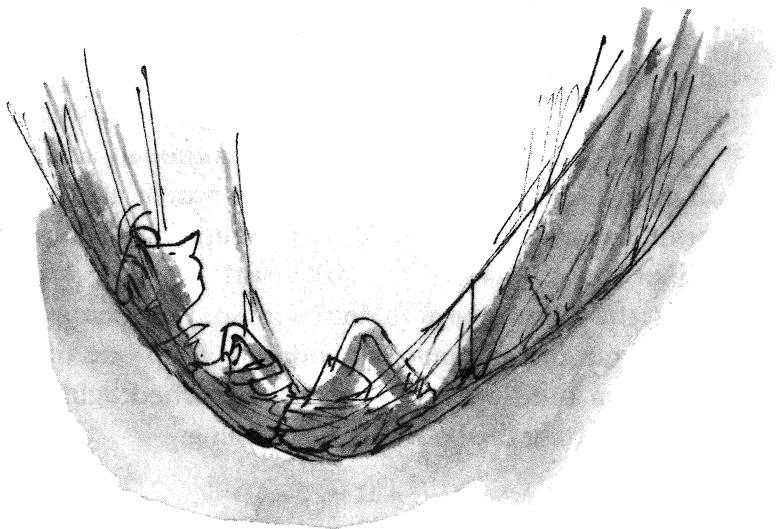


The Glow-worm slowly opened one eye and stared at the Centipede. "There is no need to be rude," she said coldly. "All in good time."

"Come on, come on, come on!" shouted the Centipede. "Or I'll put it out for you!"

"Oh, hello, James!" the Glow-worm said, looking down and giving James a little wave and a smile. "I didn't see you come in. Welcome, my dear boy, welcome—and good night!"

Then *click*—and out went the light.



James Henry Trotter lay there in the darkness with his eyes wide open, listening to the strange sleeping noises that the “creatures” were making all around him, and wondering what on earth was going to happen to him in the morning. Already, he was beginning to like his new friends very much. They were not nearly as terrible as they looked. In fact, they weren’t really terrible at all. They seemed extremely kind and helpful in spite of all the shouting and arguing that went on between them.

“Good night, Old-Green-Grasshopper,” he whispered. “Good night, Ladybug—Good night, Miss Spider—” But before he could go through them all, he had fallen fast asleep.

14

“WE’RE OFF!” someone was shouting. “We’re off at last!”

James woke up with a jump and looked about him. The creatures were all out of their hammocks and moving excitedly around the room. Suddenly the floor gave a great heave, as though an earthquake were taking place.

“Here we go!” shouted the Old-Green-Grasshopper, hopping up and down with excitement. “Hold on tight!”

“What’s happening?” cried James, leaping out of his hammock. “What’s going on?”

The Ladybug, who was obviously a kind and gentle creature, came over and stood beside him. “In case you don’t know it,” she said, “we are about to depart forever

from the top of this ghastly hill that we've all been living on for so long. We are about to roll away inside this great big beautiful peach to a land of . . . of . . . of . . . to a land of—"

"Of what?" asked James.

"Never you mind," said the Ladybug. "But nothing could be worse than this desolate hilltop and those two repulsive aunts of yours—"

"Hear, hear!" they all shouted. "Hear, hear!"

"You may not have noticed it," the Ladybug went on, "but the whole garden, even before it reaches the steep edge of the hill, happens to be on a steep slope. And therefore the only thing that has been stopping this peach from rolling away right from the beginning is the thick stem attaching it to the tree. Break the stem, and off we go!"

"Watch it!" cried Miss Spider, as the room gave another violent lurch. "Here we go!"

"Not quite! Not quite!"

"At this moment," continued the Ladybug, "our Centipede, who has a pair of jaws as sharp as razors, is up there on top of the peach nibbling away at that stem. In fact, he must be nearly through it, as you can tell from the way we're lurching about. Would you like me to take you under my wing so that you won't fall over when we start rolling?"

"That's very kind of you," said James, "but I think I'll be all right."

Just then, the Centipede stuck his grinning face through a hole in the ceiling and shouted, "I've done it! We're off!"

"We're off!" the others cried. "We're off!"

"The journey begins!" shouted the Centipede.



"And who knows where it will end," muttered the Earthworm, "if *you* have anything to do with it. It can only mean trouble."

"Nonsense," said the Ladybug. "We are now about to visit the most marvelous places and see the most wonderful things! Isn't that so, Centipede?"

"There is no knowing what we shall see!" cried the Centipede.

*"We may see a Creature with forty-nine
heads*

*Who lives in the desolate snow,
And whenever he catches a cold (which he
dreads)*

He has forty-nine noses to blow.

*"We may see the venomous Pink-Spotted
Scrunch*

*Who can chew up a man with one bite.
It likes to eat five of them roasted for lunch
And eighteen for its supper at night.*

*"We may see a Dragon, and nobody knows
That we won't see a Unicorn there.
We may see a terrible Monster with toes
Growing out of the tufts of his hair.*

*"We may see the sweet little Biddy-Bright Hen
So playful, so kind and well-bred;
And such beautiful eggs! You just boil them
and then
They explode and they blow off your head.*

*"A Gnu and a Gnocerous surely you'll see
And that gnormous and gnorrible Gnat
Whose sting when it stings you goes in at
the knee
And comes out through the top of your hat.*

*"We may even get lost and be frozen by frost.
We may die in an earthquake or tremor.
Or nastier still, we may even be tossed
On the horns of a furious Dilemma.*

*"But who cares! Let us go from this horrible
hill!*

*Let us roll! Let us bowl! Let us plunge!
Let's go rolling and bowling and spinning until
We're away from old Spiker and Sponge!"*

One second later . . . slowly, insidiously, oh most gently,
the great peach started to lean forward and steal into
motion. The whole room began to tilt over and all the fur-

niture went sliding across the floor, and crashed against the far wall. So did James and the Ladybug and the Old-Green-Grasshopper and Miss Spider and the Earthworm, also the Centipede, who had just come slithering quickly down the wall.

15

OUTSIDE IN THE GARDEN, at that very moment, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker had just taken their places at the front gate, each with a bunch of tickets in her hand, and the first stream of early-morning sightseers was visible in the distance climbing up the hill to view the peach.

"We shall make a fortune today," Aunt Spiker was saying. "Just look at all those people!"

"I wonder what became of that horrid little boy of ours last night," Aunt Sponge said. "He never did come back in, did he?"

"He probably fell down in the dark and broke his leg," Aunt Spiker said.

"Or his neck, maybe," Aunt Sponge said hopefully.

"Just *wait* till I get my hands on him," Aunt Spiker said, waving her cane. "He'll never want to stay out all night again by the time *I've* finished with him. Good gracious me! What's that awful noise?"

Both women swung around to look.

The noise, of course, had been caused by the giant peach crashing through the fence that surrounded it, and

now, gathering speed every second, it came rolling across the garden toward the place where Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker were standing.

They gaped. They screamed. They started to run. They panicked. They both got in each other's way. They began pushing and jostling, and each of them was thinking only



about saving herself. Aunt Sponge, the fat one, tripped over a box that she'd brought along to keep the money in, and fell flat on her face. Aunt Spiker immediately tripped over Aunt Sponge and came down on top of her. They both lay on the ground, fighting and clawing and yelling and struggling frantically to get up again, but before they could do this, the mighty peach was upon them.

There was a crunch.

And then there was silence.

The peach rolled on. And behind it, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker lay ironed out upon the grass as flat and thin and lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book.

16

AND NOW THE PEACH had broken out of the garden and was over the edge of the hill, rolling and bouncing down the steep slope at a terrific pace. Faster and faster and faster it went, and the crowds of people who were climbing up the hill suddenly caught sight of this terrible monster plunging down upon them and they screamed and scattered to right and left as it went hurtling by.

At the bottom of the hill it charged across the road, knocking over a telegraph pole and flattening two parked automobiles as it went by.

Then it rushed madly across about twenty fields, break-

ing down all the fences and hedges in its path. It went right through the middle of a herd of fine Jersey cows, and then through a flock of sheep, and then through a paddock full of horses, and then through a yard full of pigs, and soon the whole countryside was a seething mass of panic-stricken animals stampeding in all directions.

The peach was still going at a tremendous speed with no sign of slowing down, and about a mile farther on it came to a village.

Down the main street of the village it rolled, with people leaping frantically out of its path right and left, and at the end of the street it went crashing right through the wall of an enormous building and out the other side, leaving two gaping round holes in the brickwork.

This building happened to be a famous factory where they made chocolate, and almost at once a great river of warm melted chocolate came pouring out of the holes in the factory wall. A minute later, this brown sticky mess was flowing through every street in the village, oozing under the doors of houses and into people's shops and gardens. Children were wading in it up to their knees, and some were even trying to swim in it, and all of them were sucking it into their mouths in great greedy gulps and shrieking with joy.

But the peach rushed on across the countryside—on and on and on, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Cowsheds, stables, pigsties, barns, bungalows, hayricks, anything that got in its way went toppling over like a nine-pin. An old man sitting quietly beside a stream had his fishing rod whisked out of his hands as it went dash-

ing by, and a woman called Daisy Entwistle was standing so close to it as it passed that she had the skin taken off the tip of her long nose.

Would it ever stop?

Why should it? A round object will always keep on rolling as long as it is on a downhill slope, and in this case the land sloped downhill all the way until it reached the ocean—the same ocean that James had begged his aunts to be allowed to visit the day before.

Well, perhaps he was going to visit it now. The peach was rushing closer and closer to it every second, and closer also to the towering white cliffs that came first.

These cliffs are the most famous in the whole of England, and they are hundreds of feet high. Below them, the sea is deep and cold and hungry. Many ships have been swallowed up and lost forever on this part of the coast, and all the men who were in them as well. The peach was now only a hundred yards away from the cliff—now fifty—now twenty—now ten—now five—and when it reached the edge of the cliff it seemed to leap up into the sky and hang there suspended for a few seconds, still turning over and over in the air . . .

Then it began to fall . . .

Down . . .

Down . . .

Down . . .

Down . . .

Down . . .

SMACK! It hit the water with a colossal splash and sank like a stone.



But a few seconds later, up it came again, and this time, up it stayed, floating serenely upon the surface of the water.

17

AT THIS MOMENT, the scene inside the peach itself was one of indescribable chaos. James Henry Trotter was lying bruised and battered on the floor of the room amongst a tangled mass of Centipede and Earthworm and Spider and Ladybug and Glow-worm and Old-Green-Grasshopper. In the whole history of the world, no travelers had ever had a more terrible journey than these unfortunate creatures. It had started out well, with much laughing and shouting, and for the first few seconds, as the peach had begun to roll slowly forward, nobody had minded being tumbled about a little bit. And when it went *BUMP!* and the Centipede had shouted, "*That* was Aunt Sponge!" and then *BUMP!* again, and "*That* was Aunt Spiker!" there had been a tremendous burst of cheering all around.

But as soon as the peach rolled out of the garden and began to go down the steep hill, rushing and plunging and bounding madly downward, then the whole thing became a nightmare. James found himself being flung up against the ceiling, then back onto the floor, then sideways against the wall, then up onto the ceiling again, and up and down and back and forth and round and round, and at the same time all the other creatures were flying

through the air in every direction, and so were the chairs and the sofa, not to mention the forty-two boots belonging to the Centipede. Everything and all of them were being rattled around like peas inside an enormous rattle that was being rattled by a mad giant who refused to stop. To make it worse, something went wrong with the Glow-worm's lighting system, and the room was in pitchy darkness. There were screams and yells and curses and cries of pain, and everything kept going round and round, and once James made a frantic grab at some thick bars sticking out from the wall only to find that they were a couple of the Centipede's legs. "Let go, you idiot!" shouted the Centipede, kicking himself free, and James was promptly flung across the room into the Old-Green-Grasshopper's horny lap. Twice he got tangled up in Miss Spider's legs (a horrid business), and toward the end, the poor Earthworm, who was cracking himself like a whip every time he flew through the air from one side of the room to the other, coiled himself around James's body in a panic and refused to unwind.

Oh, it was a frantic and terrible trip!

But it was all over now, and the room was suddenly very still and quiet. Everybody was beginning slowly and painfully to disentangle himself from everybody else.

"Let's have some light!" shouted the Centipede.

"Yes!" they cried. "Light! Give us some light!"

"I'm *trying*," answered the poor Glow-worm. "I'm doing my best. Please be patient."

They all waited in silence.

Then a faint greenish light began to glimmer out of the Glow-worm's tail, and this gradually became stronger



and stronger until it was anyway enough to see by.

"*Some great journey!*" the Centipede said, limping across the room.

"I shall *never* be the same again," murmured the Earthworm.

"Nor I," the Ladybug said. "It's taken *years* off my life."

"But my dear friends!" cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper, trying to be cheerful, "we are *there*!"

"Where?" they asked. "Where? Where is *there*?"

"I don't know," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said. "But I'll bet it's somewhere good."

"We are probably at the bottom of a coal mine," the Earthworm said gloomily. "We certainly went down and down and down very suddenly at the last moment. I felt it in my stomach. I still feel it."

"Perhaps we are in the middle of a beautiful country full of songs and music," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said.

"Or near the seashore," said James eagerly, "with lots of other children down on the sand for me to play with!"

"Pardon me," murmured the Ladybug, turning a trifle pale, "but am I wrong in thinking that we seem to be bobbing up and down?"

"*Bobbing* up and down!" they cried. "What on earth do you mean?"

"You're still giddy from the journey," the Old-Green-Grasshopper told her. "You'll get over it in a minute. Is everybody ready to go upstairs now and take a look around?"

"Yes, yes!" they chorused. "Come on! Let's go!"

"I *refuse* to show myself out of doors in my bare feet," the Centipede said. "I have to get my boots on again first."

"For heaven's sake, let's not go through all that nonsense again," the Earthworm said.

"Let's *all* lend the Centipede a hand and get it over with," the Ladybug said. "Come on."

So they did, all except Miss Spider, who set about

weaving a long rope-ladder that would reach from the floor up to a hole in the ceiling. The Old-Green-Grasshopper had wisely said that they must not risk going out of the side entrance when they didn't know where they were, but must first of all go up onto the top of the peach and have a look around.

So half an hour later, when the rope-ladder had been finished and hung, and the forty-second boot had been laced neatly onto the Centipede's forty-second foot, they were all ready to go out. Amidst mounting excitement and shouts of "Here we go, boys! The Promised Land! I can't wait to see it!" the whole company climbed up the ladder one by one and disappeared into a dark soggy tunnel in the ceiling that went steeply, almost vertically upward.

18

A MINUTE LATER, they were out in the open, standing on the very top of the peach, near the stem, blinking their eyes in the strong sunlight and peering nervously around.

"What happened?"

"Where are we?"

"But this is *impossible*!"

"Unbelievable!"

"Terrible!"

"I *told* you we were bobbing up and down," the Ladybug said.

"We're in the middle of the sea!" cried James.

And indeed they were. A strong current and a high wind had carried the peach so quickly away from the shore that already the land was out of sight. All around them lay the vast black ocean, deep and hungry. Little waves were bibbling against the sides of the peach.

"But how did it happen?" they cried. "Where are the fields? Where are the woods? Where is England?" Nobody, not even James, could understand how in the world a thing like this could have come about.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said, trying very hard to keep the fear and disappointment out of his voice, "I am afraid that we find ourselves in a rather awkward situation."

"Awkward!" cried the Earthworm. "My dear Old Grasshopper, we are finished! Every one of us is about to perish! I may be blind, you know, but that much I can see quite clearly!"

"Off with my boots!" shouted the Centipede. "I cannot swim with my boots on!"

"I can't swim at all!" cried the Ladybug.

"Nor can I," wailed the Glow-worm.

"Nor I!" said Miss Spider. "None of us three girls can swim a single stroke."

"But you won't *have* to swim," said James calmly. "We are floating beautifully. And sooner or later a ship is bound to come along and pick us up."

They all stared at him in amazement.

"Are you quite sure that we are not sinking?" the Ladybug asked.

"Of course I'm sure," answered James. "Go and look for yourselves."

They all ran over to the side of the peach and peered down at the water below.

"The boy is quite right," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said. "We are floating beautifully. Now we must all sit down and keep perfectly calm. Everything will be all right in the end."

"What absolute nonsense!" cried the Earthworm. "Nothing is ever all right in the end, and well you know it!"

"Poor Earthworm," the Ladybug said, whispering in James's ear. "He loves to make everything into a disaster. He hates to be happy. He is only happy when he is gloomy. Now isn't that odd? But then, I suppose just *being* an Earthworm is enough to make a person pretty gloomy, don't you agree?"

"If this peach is not going to sink," the Earthworm was saying, "and if we are not going to be drowned, then every one of us is going to *starve* to death instead. Do you realize that we haven't had a thing to eat since yesterday morning?"

"By golly, he's right!" cried the Centipede. "For once, Earthworm is right!"

"Of course I'm right," the Earthworm said. "And we're not likely to find anything around here either. We shall get thinner and thinner and thirstier and thirstier, and we shall all die a slow and grisly death from starvation. I am dying already. I am slowly shriveling up for want of food. Personally, I would rather drown."

"But good heavens, you must be *blind*!" said James.

"You know very well I'm blind," snapped the Earthworm. "There's no need to rub it in."

"I didn't mean that," said James quickly. "I'm sorry. But can't you *see* that—"

"See?" shouted the poor Earthworm. "How can I see if I am blind?"

James took a deep, slow breath. "Can't you *realize*," he said patiently, "that we have enough food here to last us for weeks and weeks?"

"Where?" they said. "Where?"

"Why, the peach, of course! Our whole ship is made of food!"

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" they cried. "We never thought of that!"

"My dear James," said the Old-Green-Grasshopper, laying a front leg affectionately on James's shoulder, "I don't



know *what* we'd do without you. You are so clever. Ladies and gentlemen—we are saved again!”

“We are most certainly not!” said the Earthworm. “You must be crazy! You can’t eat the ship! It’s the only thing that is keeping us up!”

“We shall starve if we don’t!” said the Centipede.

“And we shall drown if we do!” cried the Earthworm.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said the Old-Green-Grasshopper. “Now we’re worse off than before!”

“Couldn’t we just eat a *little* bit of it?” asked Miss Spider. “I am so dreadfully hungry.”

“You can eat all you want,” James answered. “It would take us weeks and weeks to make any sort of a dent in this enormous peach. Surely you can see that?”

“Good heavens, he’s right again!” cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper, clapping his hands. “It would take weeks and weeks! Of course it would! But let’s not go making a lot of holes all over the deck. I think we’d better simply scoop it out of that tunnel over there—the one that we’ve just come up by.”

“An excellent idea,” said the Ladybug.

“What are you looking so worried about, Earthworm?” the Centipede asked. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is . . .” the Earthworm said, “the problem is . . . well, the problem is that there is no problem!”

Everyone burst out laughing. “Cheer up, Earthworm!” they said. “Come and eat!” And they all went over to the tunnel entrance and began scooping out great chunks of juicy, golden-colored peach flesh.

“Oh, marvelous!” said the Centipede, stuffing it into his mouth.

"Dee-licious!" said the Old-Green-Grasshopper.

"Just fabulous!" said the Glow-worm.

"Oh my!" said the Ladybug primly. "What a heavenly taste!" She looked up at James, and she smiled, and James smiled back at her. They sat down on the deck together, both of them chewing away happily. "You know, James," the Ladybug said, "up until this moment, I have never in my life tasted anything except those tiny little green flies that live on rosebushes. They have a perfectly delightful flavor. But this peach is even better."

"Isn't it glorious!" Miss Spider said, coming over to join them. "Personally, I had always thought that a big, juicy, caught-in-the-web bluebottle was the finest dinner in the world—until I tasted this."

"What a flavor!" the Centipede cried. "It's terrific! There's nothing like it! There never has been! And I should know because I personally have tasted all the



finest foods in the world!" Whereupon, the Centipede, with his mouth full of peach and with juice running down all over his chin, suddenly burst into song:

*"I've eaten many strange and scrumptious
dishes in my time,
Like jellied gnats and dandyprats and earwigs
cooked in slime,
And mice with rice—they're really nice
When roasted in their prime.
(But don't forget to sprinkle them with just a
pinch of grime.)*

*"I've eaten fresh mudburgers by the greatest
cooks there are,
And scrambled dregs and stinkbugs' eggs and
bornets stewed in tar,
And pails of snails and lizards' tails,
And beetles by the jar.
(A beetle is improved by just a splash of
vinegar.)*

*"I often eat boiled slobbages. They're grand
when served beside
Minced doodlebugs and curried slugs. And have
you ever tried
Mosquitoes' toes and wampfish roes
Most delicately fried?
(The only trouble is they disagree with my
inside.)*

*"I'm mad for crispy wasp-stings on a piece of
buttered toast,
And pickled spines of porcupines. And then a
gorgeous roast
Of dragon's flesh, well hung, not fresh—
It costs a buck at most,
(And comes to you in barrels if you order it by
post.)*

*"I crave the tasty tentacles of octopi for tea,
I like hot-dogs, I LOVE hot-frogs, and surely
you'll agree
A plate of soil with engine oil's
A super recipe.
(I hardly need to mention that it's practically
free.)*

*"For dinner on my birthday shall I tell you
what I chose:
Hot noodles made from poodles on a slice of
garden hose—
And a rather smelly jelly
Made of armadillo's toes.
(The jelly is delicious, but you have to hold
your nose.)*

*"Now comes," the Centipede declared, "the
burden of my speech:
These foods are rare beyond compare—some
are right out of reach;
But there's no doubt I'd go without*

*A million plates of each
For one small mite,
One tiny bite
Of this FANTASTIC PEACH!"*

Everybody was feeling happy now. The sun was shining brightly out of a soft blue sky and the day was calm. The giant peach, with the sunlight glinting on its side, was like a massive golden ball sailing upon a silver sea.

19

"LOOK!" CRIED THE CENTIPEDE just as they were finishing their meal. "Look at that funny thin black thing gliding through the water over there!"

They all swung around to look.

"There are two of them," said Miss Spider.

"There are *lots* of them!" said the Ladybug.

"What are they?" asked the Earthworm, getting worried.

"They must be some kind of fish," said the Old-Green-Grasshopper. "Perhaps they have come along to say hello."

"They are sharks!" cried the Earthworm. "I'll bet you anything you like that they are sharks and they have come along to eat us up!"

"What absolute rot!" the Centipede said, but his voice seemed suddenly to have become a little shaky, and he wasn't laughing.

"I am *positive* they are sharks!" said the Earthworm. "I just *know* they are sharks!"

And so, in actual fact, did everybody else, but they were too frightened to admit it.

There was a short silence. They all peered down anxiously at the sharks, who were cruising slowly round and round the peach.

"Just assuming that they *are* sharks," the Centipede said, "there still can't possibly be any danger if we stay up here."

But even as he spoke, one of those thin black fins suddenly changed direction and came cutting swiftly through the water right up to the side of the peach itself. The shark paused and stared up at the company with small evil eyes.

"Go away!" they shouted. "Go away, you filthy beast!"

Slowly, almost lazily, the shark opened his mouth (which was big enough to have swallowed a perambulator) and made a lunge at the peach.

They all watched, aghast.

And now, as though at a signal from the leader, all the other sharks came swimming in toward the peach, and they clustered around it and began to attack it furiously. There must have been twenty or thirty of them at least, all pushing and fighting and lashing their tails and churning the water into a froth.

Panic and pandemonium broke out immediately on top of the peach.

"Oh, we are finished now!" cried Miss Spider, wringing her feet. "They will eat up the whole peach and then there'll be nothing left for us to stand on and they'll start on us!"

"She is right!" shouted the Ladybug. "We are lost forever!"

"Oh, I don't want to be eaten!" wailed the Earthworm.



"But they will take me first of all because I am so fat and juicy and I have no bones!"

"Is there *nothing* we can do?" asked the Ladybug, appealing to James. "Surely *you* can think of a way out of this."

Suddenly they were all looking at James.

"Think!" begged Miss Spider. "*Think*, James, *think*!"

"Come on," said the Centipede. "Come on, James. There *must* be *something* we can do."

Their eyes waited upon him, tense, anxious, pathetically hopeful.



20

"THERE IS SOMETHING that I believe we might try," James Henry Trotter said slowly. "I'm not saying it'll work . . ."

"Tell us!" cried the Earthworm. "Tell us quick!"

"We'll try anything you say!" said the Centipede. "But hurry, hurry, hurry!"

"Be quiet and let the boy speak!" said the Ladybug. "Go on, James."

They all moved a little closer to him. There was a longish pause.

"Go *on!*" they cried frantically. "*Go on!*"

And all the time while they were waiting they could hear the sharks thrashing around in the water below them. It was enough to make anyone frantic.

"Come on, James," the Ladybug said, coaxing him.

"I . . . I . . . I'm afraid it's no good after all," James murmured, shaking his head. "I'm terribly sorry. I forgot. We don't have any string. We'd need hundreds of yards of string to make this work."

"What sort of string?" asked the Old-Green-Grasshopper sharply.

"Any sort, just so long as it's strong."

"But my dear boy, that's exactly what we do have! We've got all you want!"

"How? Where?"

"The Silkworm!" cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper. "Didn't you ever notice the Silkworm? She's still downstairs! She never moves! She just lies there sleeping all day long, but we can easily wake her up and make her spin!"

"And what about me, may I ask?" said Miss Spider. "I can spin just as well as any Silkworm. What's more, *I* can spin patterns."

"Can you make enough between you?" asked James.

"As much as you want."

"And quickly?"

"Of course! Of course!"

"And would it be strong?"

"The strongest there is! It's as thick as your finger! But why? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to lift this peach clear out of the water!" James announced firmly.

"You're mad!" cried the Earthworm.

"It's our only chance."

"The boy's crazy!"

"He's joking!"

"Go on, James," the Ladybug said gently. "How are you going to do it?"

"Skyhooks, I suppose," jeered the Centipede.

"Seagulls," James answered calmly. "The place is full of them. Look up there!"

They all looked up and saw a great mass of seagulls wheeling round and round in the sky.

"I'm going to take a long silk string," James went on, "and I'm going to loop one end of it around a seagull's neck. And then I'm going to tie the other end to the stem of the peach." He pointed to the peach stem, which was standing up like a short thick mast in the middle of the deck.

"Then I'm going to get another seagull and do the same thing again, then another and another—"

"Ridiculous!" they shouted.

"Absurd!"

"Poppycock!"

"Balderdash!"

"Madness!"

And the Old-Green-Grasshopper said, "How can a few seagulls lift an enormous thing like this up into the air, and all of us as well? It would take hundreds . . . thousands . . ."

"There is no shortage of seagulls," James answered. "Look for yourself. We'll probably need four hundred, five



hundred, six hundred . . . maybe even a thousand . . . I don't know . . . I shall simply go on hooking them up to the stem until we have enough to lift us. They'll be bound to lift us in the end. It's like balloons. You give someone enough balloons to hold, I mean *really* enough, then up he goes. And a seagull has far more lifting power than a balloon. If only we have the *time* to do it. If only we are not sunk first by those awful sharks. . . .”

"You're absolutely off your head!" said the Earthworm. "How on earth do you propose to get a loop of string around a seagull's neck? I suppose you're going to fly up there yourself and catch it!"

"The boy's dotty!" said the Centipede.

"Let him finish," said the Ladybug. "Go on, James. How *would* you do it?"

"With bait."

"Bait! What sort of bait?"

"With a worm, of course. Seagulls love worms, didn't you know that? And luckily for us, we have here the biggest, fattest, pinkest, juiciest Earthworm in the world."

"You can stop right there!" the Earthworm said sharply. "That's quite enough!"

"Go on," the others said, beginning to grow interested. "Go on!"

"The seagulls have already spotted him," James continued. "That's why there are so many of them circling around. But they daren't come down to get him while all the rest of us are standing here. So this is what—"

"Stop!" cried the Earthworm. "Stop, stop, stop! I won't have it! I refuse! I—I—I—I—"

"Be quiet!" said the Centipede. "Mind your own business!"

"I like that!"

"My dear Earthworm, you're going to be eaten anyway, so what difference does it make whether it's sharks or seagulls?"

"I won't do it!"

"Why don't we hear what the plan is first?" said the Old-Green-Grasshopper.

"I don't give a hoot what the plan is!" cried the Earthworm. "I am not going to be pecked to death by a bunch of seagulls!"

"You will be a martyr," said the Centipede. "I shall respect you for the rest of my life."

"So will I," said Miss Spider. "And your name will be in all the newspapers. Earthworm gives life to save friends . . ."

"But he won't *have* to give his life," James told them. "Now listen to me. This is what we'll do . . ."

21

"WHY, IT'S ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT!" cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper when James had explained his plan.

"The boy's a genius!" the Centipede announced. "Now I can keep my boots on after all."

"Oh, I shall be pecked to death!" wailed the poor Earthworm.

"Of course you won't."

"I will, I know I will! And I won't even be able to see them coming at me because I have no eyes!"

James went over and put an arm gently around the Earthworm's shoulders. "I won't let them *touch* you," he said. "I promise I won't. But we've *got* to hurry! Look down there!"

There were more sharks than ever now around the peach. The water was boiling with them. There must have been ninety or a hundred at least. And to the travel-



ers up on top, it certainly seemed as though the peach were sinking lower and lower into the water.

“Action stations!” James shouted. “Jump to it! There’s not a moment to lose!” He was the captain now, and everyone knew it. They would do whatever he told them.

“All hands below deck except Earthworm!” he ordered.

"Yes, yes!" they said eagerly as they scuttled into the tunnel entrance. "Come on! Let's hurry!"

"And you—Centipede!" James shouted. "Hop downstairs and get that Silkworm to work at once! Tell her to spin as she's never spun before! Our lives depend upon it! And the same applies to you, Miss Spider! Hurry on down! Start spinning!"

22

IN A FEW MINUTES everything was ready.

It was very quiet now on the top of the peach. There was nobody in sight—nobody except the Earthworm.

One half of the Earthworm, looking like a great, thick, juicy, pink sausage, lay innocently in the sun for all the seagulls to see.

The other half of him was dangling down the tunnel.

James was crouching close beside the Earthworm in the tunnel entrance, just below the surface, waiting for the first seagull. He had a loop of silk string in his hands.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Ladybug were further down the tunnel, holding on to the Earthworm's tail, ready to pull him quickly in out of danger as soon as James gave the word.

And far below, in the great hollow stone of the peach, the Glow-worm was lighting up the room so that the two spinners, the Silkworm and Miss Spider, could see what they were doing. The Centipede was down there, too,

exhorting them both frantically to greater efforts, and every now and again James could hear his voice coming up faintly from the depths, shouting, "Spin, Silkworm, spin, you great fat lazy brute! Faster, faster, or we'll throw you to the sharks!"

"Here comes the first seagull!" whispered James. "Keep still now, Earthworm. Keep still. The rest of you get ready to pull."

"Please don't let it spike me," begged the Earthworm.

"I won't, I won't. Ssshhh . . ."

Out of the corner of one eye, James watched the seagull as it came swooping down toward the Earthworm. And then suddenly it was so close that he could see its small black eyes and its curved beak, and the beak was open, ready to grab a nice piece of flesh out of the Earthworm's back.

"Pull!" shouted James.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Ladybug gave the Earthworm's tail an enormous tug, and like magic the Earthworm disappeared into the tunnel. At the same time, up went James's hand and the seagull flew right into the loop of silk that he was holding out. The loop, which had been cleverly made, tightened just the right amount (but not too much) around its neck, and the seagull was captured.

"Hooray!" shouted the Old-Green-Grasshopper, peering out of the tunnel. "Well done, James!"

Up flew the seagull with James paying out the silk string as it went. He gave it about fifty yards and then tied the string to the stem of the peach.

"Next one!" he shouted, jumping back into the tunnel.



“Up you get again, Earthworm! Bring up some more silk, Centipede!”

“Oh, I don’t like this at all,” wailed the Earthworm. “It only just missed me! I even felt the wind on my back as it went swishing past!”

“Sssshh!” whispered James. “Keep still! Here comes another one!”

So they did it again.

And again, and again, and again.

And the seagulls kept coming, and James caught them one after the other and tethered them to the peach stem.

“One hundred seagulls!” he shouted, wiping the sweat from his face.

“Keep going!” they cried. “Keep going, James!”

“Two hundred seagulls!”

“Three hundred seagulls!”

“Four hundred seagulls!”

The sharks, as though sensing that they were in danger of losing their prey, were hurling themselves at the peach more furiously than ever, and the peach was sinking lower and lower still in the water.

“Five hundred seagulls!” James shouted.

“Silkworm says she’s running out of silk!” yelled the Centipede from below. “She says she can’t keep it up much longer. Nor can Miss Spider!”

“Tell them they’ve *got* to!” James answered. “They can’t stop now!”

“We’re lifting!” somebody shouted.

“No, we’re not!”

“I felt it!”

“Put on another seagull, quick!”

“Quiet, everybody! Quiet! Here’s one coming now!”

This was the five hundred and first seagull, and the moment that James caught it and tethered it to the stem with all the others, the whole enormous peach suddenly started rising up slowly out of the water.

“Look out! Here we go! Hold on, boys!”

But then it stopped.

And there it hung.

It hovered and swayed, but it went no higher.

The bottom of it was just touching the water. It was like a delicately balanced scale that needed only the tiniest push to tip it one way or the other.

“One more will do it!” shouted the Old-Green-Grasshopper, looking out of the tunnel. “We’re almost there!”

And now came the big moment. Quickly, the five hundred and second seagull was caught and harnessed to the peach stem . . .

And then suddenly . . .

But slowly . . .

Majestically . . .

Like some fabulous golden balloon . . .

With all the seagulls straining at the strings above . . .

The giant peach rose up dripping out of the water and began climbing toward the heavens.