

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 Ladybird 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 Ladybird 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.'

## Twelve

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 *marvellous*, 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*



marvellous 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 Ladybird 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 Ladybird.

'James,' the Centipede said. 'Your name is James, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Well, James, have you ever in your life seen such a marvellous 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 Ladybird.

'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 Ladybird 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 Ladybird 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?'

## Thirteen

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 Ladybird 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