

11. THE HOBBIT (1937)

by J.R.R. Tolkien

Author

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was a Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford and later a Professor of English Language and Literature. He became famous through his fantasies, such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1955).

Genre and Theme

The Hobbit is a fantasy story which closely resembles a fairy tale. The main theme is the battle between good and evil. In Chapter 17 this battle really takes place. As in most fairy tales, there is a happy end.

Setting

The story takes place in a fantasy world, carefully designed by Tolkien himself. There is a map of the imaginary country in the book. The time of action is, as usual in fairy tales, 'once upon a time', that is to say, in an indefinite past. The story covers about a year.

Main Characters

Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit who loves comfort and a settled life.

Gandalf, a wizard.

Thorin Oakenshield, leader of the dwarves.

Dwalin, *Balin*, *Kili*, *Fili*, *Dori*, *Nori*, *Oin*, *Gloin*, *Bifur*, *Bofur* and *Bombur*, dwarves.

Other Characters

William, *Tom* and *Bert*, trolls.

Elrond, master of the Last Homely House.

Gollum, a slimy, nasty creature.

Beorn, a bear-man.

The Elvenking.

The Master of Lake-town (Esgaroth).

Bard, a courageous warrior in Lake-town.

Smaug, a dragon.

Dain, Thorin's kinsman, a brave leader of the dwarves.

Bolg, chief of the *Goblins*, bad, ugly creatures who live underground.

Eagles, noble birds.

Wargs, evil wolves.

Note: The correct English plural of 'dwarf' is 'dwarfs', but as Tolkien explains in his note, the 'dwarves' in this book are different creatures altogether.

The Story

1. Bilbo Baggins, a well-to-do hobbit, is about fifty when he is visited by Gandalf, a famous wizard. Gandalf tells Bilbo he will go on an adventure. The next day Bilbo is surprised when thirteen dwarves arrive at tea time, followed by Gandalf. They want all different kinds of food and Bilbo is kept very busy serving them. The dwarves talk and sing about the journey they are going to take. Many years ago an evil dragon called Smaug attacked the Mountain where the dwarves lived with their silver and gold, and killed most of them. Now they want to go and win back their treasures.

The dwarves think Bilbo is not brave enough to go with them. But Gandalf says that Bilbo is an excellent burglar (*inbreker*) and that they are going to need him. Gandalf gives Thorin, the leader of the dwarves, a map of the Mountain where Smaug still sleeps on their treasure. He also gives Thorin a key to a secret entrance to the Mountain. The dwarves invite themselves to bed and breakfast. Bilbo is not sure if he likes adventures.

2. The next morning all Bilbo's guests have left without him, leaving all the breakfast dishes for him to wash up. But when he has finished, Gandalf comes to tell him to hurry and join the party (*gezelschap*), who are planning to set out on the journey at 11 a.m.

Riding on ponies, they soon leave the hobbit-lands and go into the Lone-lands. The weather turns bad and everybody is in a bad mood. Moreover one day Gandalf turns up missing and they lose part of their baggage. When Bilbo investigates a light among the trees, he sees three trolls, huge ugly fellows, William, Tom and Bert, sitting round a fire. Bilbo tries to steal William's purse but he is caught. When the trolls quarrel among themselves, Bilbo is able to escape. But the dwarves come to the fire one by one and are caught by the trolls and put into sacks. The trolls want to eat the dwarves, but they quarrel so much among themselves that they forget to go underground when dawn comes, and they are turned into stone. Bilbo, Gandalf (who has come back) and the dwarves spend the night in the troll's cave and find food and weapons there.

3. Gandalf leads them to Rivendell where his friend Elrond lives in the Last Homely House. Tired and hungry the party reaches the valley. They have a fortnight's rest and soon feel better again. On Thorin's map Elrond discovers moon-letters. They say: 'Stand by the grey stone when the thrush (*lijster*) knocks and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's day will shine upon the key-hole.' Durin is Thorin's ancestor (*voorvader*). The following day they leave for the Misty Mountains.

4. During a terrible thunderstorm high in the mountains, they hide in a cave. At night they are attacked by Goblins, ugly black and evil creatures who live in the mountain. They are all taken prisoner except Gandalf. When the Great Goblin wants to lock them up, all the lights go out. The Great Goblin is killed by a glowing sword. Gandalf has come to their rescue. His sword, called Glamdring, glows when Goblins are near. The

dwarves run away, but the Goblins, who know their way in these dark tunnels, are soon close behind them. Bilbo cannot run fast enough and so the dwarves take turns carrying him on their shoulders. When the Goblins grab the dwarf Bilbo is riding on, Bilbo falls and faints.

5. When Bilbo comes to, he finds himself all alone in a dark tunnel in the mountain. Crawling along it, Bilbo finds a ring. He is glad he still has his little sword. Like Gandalf's it glows when Goblins are near.

In an underground lake lives Gollum, a dark, slimy creature. When he sees Bilbo he feels hungry but he is afraid of Bilbo's sword. He proposes a *raadeel* (competition). If Bilbo loses he will be eaten; if he wins Gollum will show him the way out. Gollum loses because he cannot guess what Bilbo has in his pocket. It is the ring, which actually belongs to Gollum. When Gollum finds that his ring is missing he howls and tries to catch Bilbo. But Bilbo escapes him because he slips the ring on his finger, and finds that it makes him invisible. He follows Gollum to the exit of the cave. It is guarded by Goblins, but thanks to the ring Bilbo is able to escape.

6. Bilbo realizes he is now on the other side of the mountains. He soon finds his friends and tells them the story of his escape, but without mentioning the ring. Fearing that the Goblins will be after them, they travel on for hours until they reach a clearing in the wood.

Suddenly hundreds of Wargs (evil wolves) arrive. Bilbo and his friends quickly climb into the trees. The wolves are waiting for the Goblins. Together they want to attack some villages. Gandalf throws burning pinecones (*denneappels*) at the wolves, causing great pain. When the Goblins arrive they set fire to the trees. Just in time Bilbo and his friends are rescued by Eagles (*adelaars*) who pick them up from the trees and take them to their eyrie (*nest*).

7. They spend the night with the Eagles. The next day the Eagles carry them many miles further on their journey. Gandalf tells them he will have to leave them soon. As they have no food left they plan to visit Beorn, a bear-man who can change his skin and turn into a bear.

Although Beorn does not like visitors he receives them with a good meal. When he has checked out their story he becomes friendly, for he hates Wargs and Goblins. When the dwarves have to travel on, he lends them ponies and gives them food and water. He warns them to be careful in Mirkwood, a dark forest. They must not drink from the river they will cross and they must never leave the path.

When they reach Mirkwood they send the ponies back to Beorn. Gandalf warns them to be careful and takes his leave.

8. For many days Bilbo and the dwarves walk through the dark, depressing wood. While crossing the black river, Bombur falls into the water. At once he is fast asleep. They have to carry the fat dwarf and they are running out of food. Bilbo climbs a tree but he cannot see the edge of the wood. When Bombur wakes up, he tells them about the wonderful dreams

he has had.

One night they see elves having a feast. The dwarves are so hungry that they leave the path. Three times they try to get nearer, but each time all the lights go out as if by magic. The third time Bilbo loses his friends in the darkness. He is attacked by a great spider but he kills it with his little sword called Sting. He slips the magic ring on and soon finds his friends. The spiders have tied them up in webs and hung them from a branch. Bilbo succeeds in luring (*lokken*) the spiders away and setting his friends free. Together they fight off the returning spiders and escape. Of course Bilbo has to tell the dwarves about the ring now. Meanwhile Thorin has been captured by the elves who live at the edge of Mirkwood.

9. Also the other dwarves are taken prisoner by the elves and imprisoned in the palace, except for the invisible Bilbo. He explores the passages, visits the dwarves in their cells and finally thinks of a way to escape. There is an underground stream, flowing under the palace. The elves throw their empty barrels (*vaten*) into the water; they are picked up downstream by the men from Lake-town (Esgaroth). One night the chief guard is drunk and Bilbo steals his keys. He sets the dwarves free and hides them in empty barrels. When the barrels are thrown into the water he clings to one himself. After some time the barrels run aground and are tied together. The next morning some men make the barrels into a raft (*vloot*) and steer it towards the lake. Bilbo, still invisible, jumps on.

10. In the evening the raft reaches Lake-town, a town built over the Long Lake, on wooden piles. Bilbo opens the barrels. The dwarves are in bad condition but alive.

The people of Lake-town are having a feast. When Thorin announces that he is 'Thorin son of Thrain son of Thrór King under the Mountain', the Master of Lake-town is suspicious. But the people of the town remember the old legends and they begin a spontaneous celebration. When the dwarves have recovered and are their old selves again, they leave for the Mountain.

11. When they get closer to the Mountain they are depressed by the desolate (*troosteloze*) landscape. They make camp and Bilbo finds the secret entrance to the Mountain, but they cannot open it. One day, when the sun is setting, Bilbo notices a big thrush. He remembers the moon-letters and calls the dwarves. When one of the last sunrays touches the door a little hole appears. Thorin puts his key into it and the door can be opened.

12. Bilbo sets out to explore the cave. He puts on the ring and soon finds Smaug, lying asleep on piles of treasure. Bilbo steals a cup and returns to his friends. When Smaug discovers the theft, he is furious. Raging and breathing fire (*vuurpuwend*) he flies round the mountain. The dwarves hide inside the tunnel but the dragon finds their ponies. The next day Bilbo visits Smaug again. They talk although Smaug cannot see the little burglar. Bilbo finds out that Smaug has one weak spot in his armour (*harnas*).

Back with his friends they decide to close the door. It is just in time; a moment later a furious Smaug passes by on his way to Lake-town.

13. While Smaug is away they all go down the tunnel to the dragon's lair (*hol*). The dwarves are delighted to see their silver and gold again. They put on coats of mail (*mailenkolders*) and fill their pockets with jewelry and coins. They leave the Mountain by way of the Front Gate. After a long and tiresome walk they arrive at one of their old look-out posts, where they settle for the moment.

14. Smaug attacks Lake-town. Many people are killed and soon the town is on fire. A group of archers (*boogschutters*) with their captain, Bard, fight bravely. An old thrush, who had heard Bilbo telling the dwarves about his talk with Smaug, tells Bard about Smaug's weak spot. Bard kills the dragon with his last arrow; the dragon crashes onto the town, ruining it completely. But many people reach the shore safely, and they are grateful to Bard who showed more courage than the Master. When he hears what has happened, the Elvenking sends an army. After houses have been built for the people of Lake-town for the coming winter, Elves and men together march towards the Mountain, planning to recover Smaug's treasure.

15. Meanwhile Bilbo and the dwarves are waiting in their look-out. Finally they hear from an old raven that Smaug is dead, but also that the Elves and Men are coming to claim a share of the treasure. Thorin sends for help to his cousin Dain. The dwarves occupy the Mountain and fortify the entrance. Bard comes at the head of the army to claim part of the treasure. But Thorin is under the spell of the gold and refuses. Bilbo thinks Thorin is not being fair to Bard; he is tired of the whole affair and wants to go home.

16. While Thorin is looking for the Arkenstone, news arrives that Dain and his dwarves are approaching. That night Bilbo puts on his ring and leaves the Mountain. He goes to the army camp to talk to Bard. Bilbo gives him the Arkenstone so that Bard will have a better bargaining (*onderhandels*) position. As he is being escorted out of the camp Bilbo is surprised to see Gandalf, who tells him that things are drawing towards the end.

17. When Bard comes to the Mountain the next day and offers Thorin the Arkenstone in return for one-fourteenth part of the treasure, Bilbo has to confess that he gave Bard the Arkenstone. Thorin is furious and sends the hobbit away. When Dain and his fierce dwarves arrive, a battle threatens to break out. Gandalf stops them. He tells them an army of Wargs and Goblins is close upon them. Dwarves, Elves and Men now prepare to fight their common enemy.

Bilbo slips on his ring and watches the Battle of the Five Armies. It is a terrible fight, and in the end the Goblins and Wargs seem victorious. But then, just before he is knocked unconscious by a stone, Bilbo sees a host of Eagles coming from the North.

18. When Bilbo comes round he learns that the battle is won. The Eagles, and later Beorn, were of great help. Thorin is dying and apologizes to Bilbo for his angry words. Dain becomes King under the Mountain and gives Bard a fourteenth share of the treasure, which he shares with the Elvenking and with Bilbo. Together with Gandalf and Beorn, Bilbo returns home.

19. When Bilbo arrives at his own house, he is surprised to see that his possessions are being auctioned (*geveild*). The Hobbits thought he was dead. It is a long time before everything is back to normal. In the eyes of the other Hobbits Bilbo remains strange, a friend of Elves and dwarves. After several years Bilbo hears from Balin that things are going well in the lands of the Mountain.

Questions (The numbers refer to the chapters.)

1. a. How do the dwarves know where Bilbo lives?
b. Who gave the map and the key to Gandalf?
2. a. What pay is Bilbo promised for his part in the adventure?
b. How does Gandalf save the dwarves from the trolls?
3. What information does Elrond give about the sword taken from the trolls' cave?
4. Why is Gandalf able to escape when the goblins attack?
5. What does Gollum call himself?
6. What makes the dwarves change their opinion of Bilbo?
7. Why doesn't the whole party enter Beorn's house together?
8. What is the cause of Bombur's fall into the water?
9. How is Bilbo discovered during the night he spends on shore?
10. Why isn't the Master sorry to see his guests leave?
11. What does Dwalin suggest when they cannot open the secret door?
12. Why does Smaug think that the Lakemen are involved?
13. What is Thorin looking for? Who has got it?
14. Why do the people of Lake-town think they have a right to the treasure?
15. What two arguments does Bard give to justify his claim to part of the treasure?
19. What further treasure do Bilbo and Gandalf take home with them?

To Think About

1. What characters are most easily affected by 'dragon-sickness' (greed for gold)? Do you see in this idea a 'moral' to the story?
2. In what way(s) does Bilbo change in the course of the story?

