"So you're going to go through with it, then," Gandalf the Wizard said

slowly.

"I am," Bilbo replied. "I've been planning this for a long time.

It'll give the Hobbits of the Shire something to talk about for the next

nine days - or ninety-nine, more likely. Anyway, at least I'll have my

little joke."

"Who will laugh, I wonder?" Gandalf mused aloud, scratching his

beard idly.

For weeks carts and caravans were coming from all over Middle-earth

to bring provisions for the Grand Old Party, as Bilbo referred to it.

Wagons of food from the Dwarvish mines at Erebor, shiny rocks from the

Sea-elves and fancy seductive packages from southern Mirkwood arrived

daily, making the neighborhood generally more crowded and cluttering up

avenues. Even those who hadn't said anything bad about Bilbo before were

starting to show their annoyance. "Mr. Bilbo Baggins is starting to get a

mite annoying," old Gaffer Gamgee grumbled, standing outside the pub.

"Queer goings-on, and no mistake. Why just yesterday a bunch o' pesky

Wood-elves dragged their cart right acrost my yard and ruined my taters!"

"A bunch of Men from Bree came to my place yesterday and tried to

sell me some aluminum siding," mused Old Noakes of Bywater. "They said it

was because they had extra after building that horrible Quonset hut over

the Party Tree, and they were trying to unload it. Strange folk

hereabouts."

"Yes, but it's good for the economy," sneered Bill Ferny, the local

banker. "A lot more money in circulation. Market's been doing well.

Unionization is down because of all the entry-level service positions

that are being created. Widening gap between the haves and have-nots,

don't you think? Good to find work for idle hands."

"And you don't know nothin' about anythin', Ferny," Gaffer Gamgee

snapped, echoing the popular community sentiment. "Mr. Bilbo Baggins is a

right bastard, as I've often said, and it's small wonder if trouble don't

come of him and his imperialist ways. The Revolution's a'comin', and it's

the likes o'you who'll be the first ag'inst the wall, so sayeth the

Lord." And with that he spat a well-aimed beer-nut into Ferny's glass.

At last the day of the Big Party arrived. Everywhere there was too

much to eat, and by midafternoon there were broken presents lying all

over the Shire attesting to the low quality of their manufacture. Gandalf

set off a series of fireworks later on in the day, including great

skywriting missiles and little flaming butterflies who took to wing,

sailed off into the Eastfarthing and burned all its trees to the ground.

The last firework sent up a great black smoke which took the shape

of a giant mountain of fire. A flicker could be seen of a giant dragon

sailing about its peak; after a moment the great dragon went sailing over

the heads of the crowd, causing great panic and consternation and six

outright heart attacks before imploding somewhere over the

Sackville-Baggins' neighborhood, causing considerable property damage

which was never properly repaired for generations afterward.

"That is the signal for supper!" Bilbo cried out to the survivors,

who were only partly mollified.

Later on, in the specially-designed quonset hut which Bilbo had

built especially for the occasion, all his friends and neighbors were

helping themselves to their third helpings of macaroni and cheese and

potato salad (the latter laced liberally with what Bilbo called the

"traditional secret ingredient", which while not actually a narcotic

still had unusual effects, the sum of which were still under scientific

inquiry in some circles), Bilbo stood up and motioned for quiet. "A

speech! A speech!" some of his neighbors cried out in fear.

My dear Hobbits! Bilbo began. There was much cheering at this,

as Hobbits on the whole are a rather egocentric lot, and anyway the

latest round of potato salad was beginning to kick in.

My dear Bagginses and Bracegirdles, Boffins and Borfledebees,

Casmits and Cantankerums, Fassbinders and Fazoolas, Wombats and

Wafflefoots. "WaffleFEET!" cried out an irate old man at the back, in

fact the very man who had earned the name when Bilbo's nephew Frodo had

accidentally dropped a hot waffle-iron on his feet some years ago. He had

borne the Bagginses no ill-will, since the settlement was quite generous.

Wafflefoots, continued Bilbo, oblivious. This is my nine hundreth

birthday! And though one million years is too short a time to have spent

with you all...

There was some muffled conversation throughout the hall, which Bilbo

took notice of. Well, on bad days it seems like a million years, he

explained. Anyway, though ten billion years is long enough to endure

from all of you, this is IT... I am GOING... I am leaving NOW...

GoodBYE! And with that Bilbo leaped up, tore all his clothes off,

scattering them about the astonished guests' heads, and ran from the

great Hut screaming and flailing his arms.

Young Frodo looked on in bemusement, refusing to answer questions

from the astonished crowd. Everyone knew, of course, that Bilbo was a big

man in the community. But - and Frodo looked at the crowd, particularly

noting the astonishment on old Lobelia's face - until now, nobody knew just

how big.

"Well! That's done!" Bilbo laughed, emerging from the bedroom at Bag

End freshly dressed. "You know, Gandalf, I've been wanting to do that for

as long as I can remember. Now I think this would be an excellent time to

leave the Shire, at least before they can all find their torches and

axe-handles. Everything stays with Frodo, as we promised."

"Including the Ring?" Gandalf asked.

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Bilbo replied. He pulled the Ring out

from under his cloak, where it hung on a fine golden chain Bilbo had

stolen of old from the Brandybucks. "Still, though, I kind of hate to get

rid of it."

"This seemed to me to be the only thing worthwhile about your whole

stupid plan," Gandalf said uncharacteristically. "Put it on the mantel

and walk away from it. It has got far too much hold on you. Let it go!"

"It's mine! And I shall keep it, I say!"

Gandalf raised himself up to his full height. Bilbo's hand reached

quietly for the hilt of his sword. "It will be my turn to get angry

soon," the wizard intoned. "Listen to me: you must give Frodo the Ring!"

Bilbo suddenly laughed. "Oh, that? " he grinned. "Well, of course

I'm giving him the Ring! I thought you meant the chain." Slipping the

Ring off the chain he set the circle of gold on the mantel without a

second thought. Then he slipped the chain about his neck. "I love this

chain. Stole it from old Matuseck Brandybuck back before he went senile.

Wouldn't part with it for love nor money. No, I don't give two flies

about the Ring. Nothing but trouble, that thing has been.

"Well, I'm off, Gandalf! I'm off on the road again, and not a moment

too soon by the look of that crowd down there." And taking an old

walking-stick from the stand by the door Bilbo went outside, taking a

path around the back of the Hill so he could leave unobserved, and as he

left he began singing a song quietly to himself:

While often by the door I lie

And look upon the mountains' feet

And think of rains and hikers' pains

And sleeping wetly in the sleet,

When darkness' cry does terrify

And wilderness encircles you,

And being food for goblins' brood

Is one choice, and starvation two;

Then staying home instead of roam

Will have a very great appeal!

Forego the Quest! And have a rest!

Let Dwarves and Elves and wizards squeal!

But since the Shire is filled with ire,

And all my neighbors fevers grip,

It's plain to see! I must agree!

The time has come to take a trip!

Hours later Frodo returned to Bag End, a little glad to have thrown

off the pursuit at last. He started at first to discover someone waiting

for him in the living-room, but sighed with relief when he saw it was

only Gandalf.

"Did he get away?" Frodo asked.

"He did," Gandalf replied. "And just at the last, for they were

getting ready to set after him with dogs. Luckily he doubled back at the

Three-Farthing Stone, as I recommended, or there would be a special

bonfire in Tuckborough tonight. Are you well?"

"Yes," Frodo replied. "I managed to convince everyone I was

uninvolved with the Hay Incident."

"Good," Gandalf said. He lit his pipe with a nearby candle and

looked at Frodo evenly. "He left things for you on the mantel. The deed to

Bag End, a signed statement saying you were only an unwitting accomplice

in the Bywater Incident, and-"

"The Ring!" Frodo said, looking at the mantel with astonishment.

"Has he left me that?"

"He has," Gandalf replied, "though you'll have to find a new chain.

But if I may counsel you in the use of your own - don't use it! Now or

later! It may have other powers besides quick and easy seduction."

"I can't believe Bilbo left me the Ring," Frodo gasped. "He used to

say that it and a bottle of Westfarthing Chinook was all you needed for

the perfect weekend."

"Well, lock it up someplace and stay away from it," Gandalf intoned.

"No Took-wives, no Elf-virgins, and no real estate deals. And no political

aspirations! In the morning I'm off to see if I can learn more about it.

In the meantime leave it unused until I return."

"I'll, uh, I'll think about that, all right," Frodo blurted, trying

hard not to think about the Ring and young Cassiopiea Took.

The next morning Gandalf left, leaving Frodo with only his thoughts,

his yearnings and a half-empty bottle of Westfarthing Chinook for

company.

The talk did not die down in nine or even ninety-nine days. Indeed, the

story of Banger Baggins, who used to run around naked at night and ravish

young maidens, became a favourite story, not least among those who could lay

a claim to belonging to that category. Frodo, however, remained wed to

celibacy. He lived alone, as Bilbo had done; but he had a good many friends,

especially among the younger hobbits. His closest friends were Pipsqueak

Took and Moribund ("Morrie" or "the Mobster") Brandybuck, one of them

friendly and willing if somewhat pimply, the other as cold as ice and as

ruthless as a society hostess. Not for nothing were Morrie and his family

feared throughout the Shire, even by the Shirriffs though those were all on

the Brandybuck paylist.

Frodo enjoyed being his own master and the Mr Baggins of Bag End. He

lived on quietly, increasing his inherited fortune through wise investments

and high-interest loans which earned him the nickname of "Sharkey", until

his fiftieth birthday drew near. Then Gandalf turned up again. Frodo

welcomed his old friend with surprise and great delight. They looked hard at

one another.

"You are becoming grossly fat, Frodo," said Gandalf. "Luckily, I have some

really good exercise in store for you."

"You are too kind," murmured Frodo. "Please don't exert yourself on my

behalf."

"I'm afraid I have to," replied the wizard. "That ring of yours - do you

still have it?"

"Yes, of course," said Frodo. "I would gladly get rid of it; every time

I've tried it on I kept stumbling over my own invisible feet since I could

not see them. I wish I had never accepted the pesky thing. Will you not take

the ring, Gandalf!"

"No!" cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. "That ring would bugger up my

spells completely. No, no, I refuse! But I can give you some advice about

how to get rid of it, if you want."

"What is that?" demanded Frodo.

"Take it to Mordor and drop it in the Cracks of Doom," said Gandalf. "If

you don't, Sauron will come and take it. And you don't want him to do that;

he gets pissed off at people who have touched his precious ring." He lit a

cigar. "But if you put an end to the ring, you off Sauron too. The little

dimwit infused so much of himself in the ring that his destruction with it

is certain."

"But I remember how you once told me that Sauron thought the ring had been

destroyed."

"I did. He thought it had been thrown into the Cracks of Doom, as should

have happened. Now, however, he knows that it isn't so."

"But how can he have thought any such thing? If the ring had been

destroyed he wouldn't have been around; so he should have realized that the

ring had not been destroyed."

"As I told you, he is a dimwit. He really is incredibly stupid.All the

same, there was a scholarly article in The Minas Tirith Review about the

Ring yesterday, written by the learned Dr Faramir. Sauron must have read

that article; he subscribes to an excellent newscutting agency. His

emissaries may be on their way to the Shire at this very moment."

"I had better leave at once," said Frodo.

"I agree," said Gandalf. Suddenly he stopped as if listening. Frodo became

aware that all was very quiet, inside and outside. Gandalf crept to one

side of the window. Then with a dart he sprang to the sill, and thrust a

long arm out as if to catch somebody. Then his movement stopped. He

straightened up and snorted.

"No one has been eavesdropping," he said. "Excellent. You'd better leave

as soon as possible, Frodo. Take that servant of yours, Sam, with you. He

looks like a sturdy lad and might come in useful."

Despite Frodo's resolution to leave at once, he was in truth very

reluctant to start, now that it had come to the point. One afternoon

two or three weeks after Gandalf's warning (or maybe four, or perhaps

just one; Frodo spent most of the days that followed drunk, and rather

lost track of time), Frodo went to the wizard for advice. "Gandalf,"

he asked, voice filled with concern, "I can't just vanish without a

trace. After Bilbo's farewell stunt, I'd never be able to look the

old hobbit in the eye again if I didn't keep up the family tradition.

Like father, like son, you know."

Gandalf, confused, said, "Father? What are you talking about?

Bilbo was your first and second cousin, once removed either way... I

should know, I had to sit through two and a half hours of old Gaffer

Gamgee's genealogy lectures at the party. Seating me next to him was

one of Bilbo's little jokes."

"Oh, well, you know," Frodo fumbled, "Bilbo did have the Ring and

all, and my mother was quite comely when she was a lass... the whole

thing has been discussed before, though not generally in polite

company. I'd rather not talk about it. And anyway, this isn't

getting me any closer to an excuse to leave."

"Don't worry, Frodo," replied Gandalf. "I thought you might prove

to be hesitant, so I've taken some steps of my own to provide for a

suitably ignominious departure for you."

Just as Frodo gave Gandalf a sharp, suspicious look, a hammering

sound came down the hall from the front door. "What in the heavens is

that?" cried Frodo.

"Unless I miss my guess," Gandalf explained, "those will be your

creditors. I took the liberty of closing your bank accounts and

taking out a number of short term loans in your name from some of your

competitors in the 'Sharkey' business. As I recall, they come due

today. Incidentally, I've got to be off to, er, scout out the road

ahead, so I'll just slip out and catch up with you later. Look for me

in Bree!" And with that, the old wizard dashed off and was gone.

Frodo leapt out of his chair in a panic, as the hammering on the

door became more insistent. "What have you done with my money?" he

yelled in the direction Gandalf had run, but he knew that chasing the

wizard would only waste valuable escape time. Fortunately, Pipsqueak

and Morrie were visiting for the day, accompanied by Pipsqueak's

annoying younger brother Fatty, and Sam was back in the cellar doing

some unspecified repairs. Quickly, Frodo rounded up his friends and

explained the situation.

"The Sackville-Baggins 'family' is here to take everything they can

get their grubby hands on," Frodo explained, "and that includes me and

all of my friends. We'd better clear out in short order if we don't

want to end up at the bottom of Bywater Pool. Quickly, now, run

through the hole and grab everything valuable that isn't bolted down:

the thought of the Sackville-Bagginses getting a hold of my things

makes me sick, and anyway, I'll be broke if we don't pile up some of

this loot before we go."

Quickly the five hobbits scattered throughout the hole, filling old

pillow cases with whatever they could carry. Frodo had a strong door,

but now the pounding gave way to a repeated ramming sound; he knew

they didn't have much time. He met Pipsqueak, Morrie, and Fatty in

the study as they had agreed: it was on the lefthand side of the hall

(going in) like all the best rooms, for these were the only ones to

have windows large enough for a desperate hobbit to climb out in an

emergency. After a tense minute's delay, Frodo shouted back into the

hole. "Sam!" he called. "Sam! Time!"

"Coming, sir!" came the answer from far within, followed soon by Sam

himself, wiping his mouth. "I was just saying farewell to Rosi--um,

the beer-barrel in the cellar."

Frodo looked down at Sam's hand. "Give me that Ring," he snapped,

as he yanked the ancient artifact off of Sam's finger. With that,

they all scrambled out of the window along with their bags of loot.

Just at that moment, a great crash came from the hall as the door

finally gave way.

"Sam," said Frodo once they were outside, "take this key to your

father, and tell him to hold on to it. We're going need it when we

come back for revenge. Then cut along the Row and meet us as quick as

you can at the gate in the lane beyond the meadows. We are not going

through the village tonight. Too many ears pricking and eyes prying."

Sam ran off at full speed, while Frodo and the others loaded the cart

that Morrie had fortunately brought along that morning.

The sun went down. Sad and frightening sounds came from within Bag

End in the dark, as the Sackville-Bagginses wrecked and looted the

place in their search for Frodo. Once the cart had been hastily

packed, Frodo sent Morrie and Fatty with it on ahead. Morrie was,

as a rule, terrible company on a hike, and Fatty was a hundred times

worse. "Sam and Pipsqueak and I will meet you at the safehouse in

Crickhollow the day after tomorrow," he said, and they drove away as

quietly yet quickly as they could.

Frodo looked back at the dark black windows of Bag End, some of

which were being smashed out as he watched. One of the windows near

the cellar seemed to have a ripped piece of a hobbit lass's dress torn

and fluttering on a nail. He waved his hand to his long home.

"Good-bye!" he said, and then turned and (following Bilbo, if he had

known it) hurried after Pipsqueak down the garden path. Taking the

most secret route they knew, they jumped over the low place in the

hedge at the bottom and took to the fields, passing into the blessed

concealment of darkness like a cattle rustler into the grasses.

They met Sam at the gate, and proceeded along the deserted lane for

a mile or two, at which point they cut off into the fields to throw

off pursuit. After some time they crossed the Water, and made their

way toward the hilly country to the south. "Well, I'll say this,"

remarked Frodo as he looked back into the valley of Hobbiton and back

to the Hill, where tiny flames had begun to rise from the vicinity of

Bag End, "that was quite an exit. I wonder if I'll ever be able to

show my face in that valley again?" Sam and Pipsqueak were walking on

ahead exchanging dirty stories, and Frodo's question went unanswered.

The three friends walked on and on into the night. Eventually, the

moon set, and after Pipsqueak nearly fell into a deep streambed for

the third time, the hobbits agreed that they should stop where they

were and sleep for the night. Of course, none of them had thought to

take any bedding with them on the trip, so they all curled up on top

of the tree roots nearby, ignoring the soft, comfortable bed of

fir-needles that covered the ground beyond the roots. They set no

watch: they had drawn lots, but when Frodo and Sam noticed Pipsqueak

cheating they all decided it was a lost cause and went to bed.

A few creatures came and looked at them as they slept. A fox

passing through the wood on business of his own stopped several

minutes and sniffed. "Hobbits!" he thought. "And sleeping out of

doors under a tree at that. There's something mighty queer behind

this. I'd better head off to tell my friends Bombadil, Gandalf, and

El Rond all about it in short order. Good thing I can speak Westron."

The next morning came, pale and clammy. The three friends went on

walking through the trees, and Frodo began to chant to himself in a

low voice:

The Road goes ever on and on,

and on and on and on and on,

and on and on the Road has gone,

why did I let Morrie drive the cart?

Sam and Pipsqueak stopped and gave Frodo an odd look, but when he

didn't respond they all went on their way, deeper into the wood.

The sun was beginning to get low and the hobbits had just passed

into a stand of beech trees when they heard hoofbeats on the road

behind them. "Quick!" whispered Frodo, staring back the way they had

come. "They must have found our tracks sooner than we thought. Hide

behind the trees!" He turned back around, and realized that his

friends hadn't needed his advice: they had already run a good ways

into the wood and buried themselves under a pile of leaves. Frodo

himself only had time to duck behind a nearby statue of a Pukel-man

when a tall black horse came into view.

On it sat a large black man, wearing a dark, dark grey cloak and

hood. When the horse reached the statue level with Frodo it stopped,

and the black man started looking from side to side, breathing

heavily. A light breeze blew in Frodo's direction, and Frodo caught a

whiff of a terrible smell like last Easter's missing egg. He gagged,

and the black man stared toward his hiding place and began to climb

off of his horse.

But at that moment there came a sound like mingled song and

laughter. The black man started to tap his foot, then hum along with

the music. Finally, he started singing out loud, and then suddenly

realized what he was doing. He got an extremely sheepish look on his

face, leapt up on his horse, and rode away in utter embarrassment.

"Elves!" exclaimed Sam, coming with Pipsqueak to Frodo's side.

"Elves, sir!" Frodo nodded, and as the voices drew nearer, their song

became clearer:

O! What are we doing,

And where are we going?

We're soon barbecuing!

The river is flowing!

O! tra-la-la-lally

up out of the valley!

O! What are we seeking,

And where are we making?

The faggots are reeking!

The bannocks are baking!

O! tril-lil-lil-lolly

the vally was jolly,

ha! ha!

Well, okay, not that much clearer, but Elves are like that.

Nevertheless, Sam stood enchanted. "Is it true, Mr. Frodo, that Elves

have drugs the like of which no mortal has ever known? It certainly

sounds like it."

Frodo answered, with awe but not without disappointment. "Yes, Sam.

These are, indeed, High Elves. Sadly, they share not their precious

drugs with outsiders. Still, they can be good company, and they sure

throw a great barbecue."

As the Elves drew near, Frodo stepped out into the path. "Elen sila

lumenn' omentielvo!" he said in his most friendly tones.

The Elves appeared confused. "What do you mean, Frodo, that your

sister has a wombat through her tea-time?" Frodo cursed under his

breath, and swore a silent oath to himself never to trust Bilbo's

language lessons again. The Elf went on, "No matter. You look weary

and hungry; would you like to come with us to dinner?"

"Certainly, good people," replied Frodo greatfully, for the dinner

invitations of the High Elves are rare and prized indeed, "but how do

you know my name?"

"We have watched you long," they laughed, "and your father Bilbo

before you." At this, Frodo winced, but they took no notice. "Your

adventures with that young Cassiopiea Took were quite amusing, and as

for Bilbo, well..." Frodo was now blushing furiously, and the Elves

(together with Sam and Pipsqueak) simply laughed again and said no

more. They passed on into the night, until they came to a clearing in

the wood.

In the clearing, there stood a ring of great upright standing

stones, connected from top to top with other great stone slabs all

around the circle. "Welcome to Sto-wan-hensh, our hall of feasts,"

said Gildor, the leader of the Elves. "You are fortunate: it is

almost time for supper."

Even as Gildor spoke, an Elf sighting along two tall stones cried

out, "The stars are now in place! It's ten o'clock; soup's on!"

Torches and bonfires leapt into life all around the stone circle, and

soon the entire company was happily eating barbecued fox and toasted

cornbread. A large flat stone in the center of the ring had been

scrubbed clean, and was surrounded by blazing fires that heated it

almost until it glowed; an Elf was frying bacon on its top. The

hobbits tried not to feel disappointed when the High Elves didn't

offer them any miruvor when it was passed around, but other than

that the evening was perfect.

Frodo soon decided to share some of his fears and concerns with

Gildor as they ate. "Gildor, what would a black man be doing in the

Shire? We were pursued by one today, and he only left when he heard

your company approach."

"A black man? In the Shire?" said Gildor doubtfully. "I have never

heard of such a thing, not since the old days of the Kings and their

battles with Angmar. Just about everyone in this part of the world is

Caucasian, and that's a fact."

"And yet," explained Frodo, "he was there, and I was frightened.

I've never been comfortable around minorities."

From the background, Pipsqueak spoke up, "Be sure to tell him about the

smelling! I'm sure it is very important!"

"Well," Frodo said to Gildor, "he did have this awful odor..."

Gildor cut Frodo off sharply. "Hold it right there. This story is

racist enough as it is; we don't need any comments about 'Black

Breath' making it worse."

"Right. We'll drop the subject," said Frodo. "Nevertheless, I am

pursued, even before I have left the Shire. I am supposed to meet

Gandalf in Bree, but I don't know how I'll even make it that far, or

what to do if he isn't there. I'm at a loss, I'm frightened, and I'm

bearing a terrible burden on which may rest the fate of all

Middle-earth. Can you give me any advice?"

"No. Yes." said Gildor.

In the morning Frodo awoke refreshed. He was lying in a bower made by

a living tree with branches laced and drooping to the ground; his bed

was of fern and grass, deep and soft and strangely fragrant. The scent

was almost intoxicating and Frodo was dizzy with light-headedness. He

jumped out and went down.

Sam was sitting in the grass near the edge of the wood quietly giggling

to himself. Pipsqueak was standing studying the sky with open mouthed

awe. There was no sign of the Elves.

"They have left us some fruit and drink, and bread," said Pipsqueak.

"Come and have your breakfast. The bread tastes strange, but

wonderful! I didn't want to leave you any, but Sam thought it might do

you some good." At this the hobbits laughed under their hands at Frodo.

Unperturbed, Frodo sat and sampled some of the Elves' bread. It was

brown and sweet and had an unusual peppery tang that he couldn't

identify. Sam came and sat by him as he broke fast. "What's the plan

for today?" asked Pipsqueak.

"To walk to Bucklebelt as quickly as possible," answered Frodo, and

gave his attention to the food. Odd as it was, it seemed to make him

feel better and better.

"Do you think we'll see those Riders?" asked Pipsqueak cheerfully.

Under the Elven bread's spell, a whole troop of Black Riders did not

seem so alarming to him.

"Yes, probably," said Frodo, "but I hope to get across the river

without their seeing us."

"Did you find out anything from Gildor?"

"No, not really."

"Did you ask about the smell?"

"We didn't discuss it," said Frodo with small embarassment.

"You should have. I am sure it's terribly important!"

The hobbits eyed Pipsqueak for a moment before they all broke out into

peals of laughter that they did not understand.

"My," gasped Frodo after regaining some control over his mirth, "this

is fine bread!"

They soon broke camp and started again their long trek. After a while,

Frodo called a halt and the Hobbits discovered that they had walked too

far to the south. After some small debate, they made straight East into

a wood that offered some shelter against the coming rain. As they

marched, Sam thought he caught a glint of steel in the distance and

stopped short. As he turned his head to look, Sam could have sworn he

saw an elf-maid heavily armed and camoflauged peering from behind a bush

at him, but when he blinked, nothing was there.

"What's the matter, Sam?" asked Pipsqueak.

"What? Oh, nothing master Pipsqueak, sir. Just the rain playing tricks

on me, I suppose. I could use a rest for a bit, and that's a fact."

To this they all agreed and made for the shelter of a majestic Elm.

Frodo propped his back against the tree-trunk, and closed his eyes.

Sam and Pipsqueak sat near, and they began to hum, and then to sing

softly:

Yo! Ho! Ho! and a bottle of rum!

Fifteen men on a dead man's chest,

The cabin-boy and Cap'n, an outrage to some.

But me Parrot on me shoulder, he's the best.

An the scurvy dogs a lyin' in davy Jones' locker

Will rise at the latter day - oh what a shocker!

Yo! Ho! Ho! they began again louder. They stopped short suddenly.

Frodo sprang to his feet. A long-drawn wail came down the wind, like

the cry of some fell and lonely creature: (heh) (hehhehehheh) (snicker)

(SLAP) (SPANK) (heh) (heheh) (heheheh) (snicker) (heh) (Bwwwaaaahahahahahahaa!)

(heheheh) (..........heh) It rose and fell, and ended on a high

piercing note. Even as they stood, it was answered by another cry

fainter and further off, but no less blood-chilling.

"What do you think that was?" asked Pipsqueak in a terrified voice.

"That weren't no bird I ever heard."

"It wasn't any bird or beast," said Frodo, "There were words in that

cry, though I could not catch them."

No more was said and the Hobbits quickly gathered their gear and moved

on through the woods. Very soon they came to a clearing and beyond to

fields planted with poppy and a strange variety of mushroom.

"I know these fields!" cried Pipsqueak. "We've wandered farther south

than we thought. These are Michel Delving's fields."

"Who's that?" asked Sam.

"I'm sorry. You'd know him better as Farmer Maggot, I think."

"One trouble after another," said Frodo. "I've been horribly afraid

of Farmer Maggot ever since he caught me trying to steal some of his

mushrooms as a lad. He beat me and then showed me to his wood shed.

'See, lads,' he said, 'next time this varmint sets foot on my land, you

can eat him. Now see him off!' They chased me all the way to the ferry

and I've never got over the fright!"

"Well, it's time you made it up, then, cousin," said Pipsqueak and

headed off across the fields.

"Don't you worry, master," said Sam, "I won't let no one beat you this

time, and that's a fact." Frodo screwed up his courage and set after

them, to what doom he knew not.

Suddenly, as they drew nearer to the farm-house, a terrific groaning

and grating broke out, and a loud voice was shouting, "Twig! Branch!

Elm! Come on, lads!"

The hobbits stopped dead and very soon the gate opened and three huge

logs came rolling out into the lane and dashed towards the travellers,

barking fiercely. They took no notice of Pipsqueak but two of them

cornered Sam and looked at him in a way that can only be described as

woodenly. The largest and fiercest of the logs halted in front of

Frodo, bristling and growling in a deep timbre.

Through the gate came the largest man any of the hobbits ever saw.

"Hallo! Hallo! And what may you be wanting?" he asked.

"Good afternoon, Mr Delving," said Pipsqueak.

The farmer looked at him closely. "That's Maggot to you, master

Pipsqueak - Mr Paragraph Took, I should say!" he cried with relief.

"It's been a long while since I saw you about these parts. It's a good

thing I recognised you; I was about to set my logs on you after the

queer vistor I had this morning."

"Who would that be, Mr Maggot?" asked Frodo.

"You didn't see him? He left not half an hour ago. All dressed in

Black he was and as foul smelling a customer as you could hope to meet.

Came riding right through my poppies, he did, and right up to my door

bold as you please. 'This path don't lead no where,' I said to him, 'your

best way is straight back to the road.'

"'I'm looking for Baggins,' he hissed at me.

"'Who are you?' says I.

"'Ummmmm.....'

"'Your name's "M"?'

"'Yeeeessss, that's right, my name's M. Now will you tell me if

Baggins comes? I will bring gold!' he said.

"'Oh no, you won't,' I said. 'You'll bugger off back the way you came

and double quick! You can use the path this time.' I set the logs onto

him but he struck a match and they shied away even as he stormed out

right over my poppies again! Now then, Pipsqueak, who're your

companions?"

"Well, this is Sam and that's Frodo Baggins," said Pipsqueak.

"Well, if that isn't queerer than ever. You best come inside," said

Maggot and waved his arm for them to follow him.

Later, they all passed the news while waiting for Mrs Maggot to finish

preparing dinner. Frodo and Sam learned much about Mr Maggot and his

doings. He told them that the guard logs were given to him by his

brother who lived in the enchanted part of the old forest (or one hundred

acre wood as it is known in latter days) and told them also of his dealings

with the Elves and their lust for the distillation made from his poppies

known as Morofeen that brought Mr Maggot most of his business these

days.

"Haven't seen much of old Bombadil in a long time though," Maggot said,

"lives in the old forest, too, he does. Used to buy my mushrooms by the

bushel-full, but now with all the ill news and all, I can hardly push

off my special 'shrooms to the Hobbit teens down Bucklebelt way."

Then the table was set with all the hobbits could eat, and the

centerpiece was a large bowl of steamed mushrooms.

"I'm sure our master Frodo still has a liking for mushrooms, I

daresay," jibed Maggot.

"How did you..."

"Oh, I remember you all-right, Mr Baggins!" A cough from Sam drew

attention.

"I'm afraid Sam has heard about your beating me and is a little wary of

you, Mr Maggot," put in Frodo quickly, secretly waving Sam into closing

his flick-knife.

"Well, I'm sorry I beat your master, Sam, but he oughtn't have thieved

my mushrooms. Least of all those kind. Only for special customers I

grow them. Cost me a bundle, your Mr Frodo did, and right sick he would

have been, too, if he'd've eaten them. No, these mushrooms are better

for you and me!" said Maggot digging another spoonful of buttery

fungus onto his plate.

After a respite and a further dinnner and another respite, Mr Maggot

offered to take the travellers to the Bucklebelt ferry in his cart to

avoid any strangers waiting to waylay them on the road. When all was

prepared and the cart loaded, it was well after dark and Frodo worried

they might miss the last ferry and Morrie both. But his fears were

eased when after the hobbits climbed aboard the cart and were hidden

under a tarpaulin, Mr Maggot lifted mightliy on the two levers and set

off at a great pace down the road. They were bumped and bruised as the

cart's single wheel endeavored to find every crack and rock in the road,

or so it seemed to Frodo.

To break the agony of their journey, Frodo slipped on the ring and

called in a cooing voice, "Ohhhhh Saaaammmm. Sammy Sammy

Sammm-Saammmm.."

"Now cut that out, Mister Frodo! It not funny trying to get me all hot

and bothered just so's you can laugh at me, and that's a fact!" Sam

spat indignantly.

"Oh, Sam, I'm only having you on. No need to be upset." said Frodo.

"Well as long as you're not trying to have it off with me, we'll get

along just fine, and that's a fact!"

"Do you end all your sentences with and that's a fact?" asked

Pipsqueak.

"I don't know what you mean, Mister Pipsqueak, and that - " The

hobbits rolled with laughter for the rest of their trip.

An hour later they felt a sharp bump as Mr Maggot dropped his load

heavily. They could hear him whispering to someone on the road.

"Don't you come a step nearer, missy! Who are you and what do you

want?" There were sounds of a struggle and then a sharp high-pitched

yell followed by the sound of something large being dropped into the

river. Soon, Mr Maggot opened the make-shift cover concealing the

hobbits and bade them get out.

"What happened, Mr Maggot?" asked a very worried Frodo.

"Well, there was this queer looking lady in the road holding up the

brightest sword ever I saw. I went up to her and her face was painted

all green and brown like. She's an elf if ever I saw one, but why she

looked so fearsome, I do not know. Anyway, she takes a swing at me with

her sword, but missed her mark, so I gave her a shove just to learn her

who her betters are, but I shoves too hard and wouldn't you know -

straight over the side of the Bridge she drops right in the water. I

looked for her and thought of calling you all out to help me, but she

disappeared just as any frog might do. No sign of her now, though."

As he was finishing his tale, the sound of hoof-beats approached and

they all were relieved to see Morrie riding up across the bridge to

meet them.

"There you are, Frodo!" he cried "I was worried when you didn't

arrive by nightfall, so I came looking for you. Hallo, Mr Maggot!"

"Good Ev'nin to you, master Moribund! Well, I'll leave you all now and

get myself home. I hope you'll stop travelling and settle down, Mr

Frodo, now you're here with us."

"Thank you," said Frodo, "and thanks for all your kindness."

"Well," he said after Maggot had gone a fair distance, "what are we

waiting for? Let's get to the ferry."

"Begging your pardon, Mr Frodo, sir," said Sam, "It seems to me we

could cross just as well by this here bridge, if you take my meaning."

The hobbits' blank expressions showed they clearly did not. "Why can't

we just cross here the way Mr Morrie did and save ourselves some time

and maybe trouble of another sort? We'd be a dead target for that

elf-maid - or whatever she was - us riding on the water, and that's a

....." Again Pipsqueak and Frodo howled with laughter, and Morrie led

the way down the side of the bridge to where the ferry was tethered.

"Well," said Morrie, as the laughter subsided, "we'd

best be going ourselves. I'm looking forward to a meal

and a pint of ale." Across the river the hobbits could

see the cheerful glow of neon lights blinking in the

windows of Brandy Hall.

Long ago, Gorhendad Oldbuck (Morrie's great-great-great-

grandfather, his great-great-uncle, or his third cousin once

removed, depending on which branch of the family tree you

trace) was the town drunk of Bywater. People called him all

kinds of names -- Drunkenbuck, Alebuck, and the like -- but the

name that stuck was Brandybuck. Unfortunately for him, he

lived at the time of the Shire's great experiment with

prohibition. Unhappy with the dry state of affairs, he moved

across the Brandywine River and set up his own little country,

where the alcohol flowed freely. Pretty soon, the greater

portion of the Shire's population was packed into a small strip

of land between the River and the Forest. The mayor of Michel

Delving finally admitted defeat and repealed prohibition. Most

hobbit folk returned to the four farthings, but Brandybuck and

his family had set up a nice home in Bucklebeltland, so they

stayed behind. To this day, Bucklebeltland is still known for

it's cavalier attitude towards the Shire's laws (making it the

perfect place for Frodo to hide out from tax laws and bill

collectors), and also for the fine quality of its many pubs.

As the ferry-boat moved away from the shore, Sam peered

uneasily at the darkly swirling water, convinced that an armed

elf-princess would jump up and bonk him on the nose. Knowing

the Bucklebeltlanders' reputation, he wasn't sure that he liked

the idea of taking a boat piloted by Morrie (after all, Frodo's

parents Gordo and Primadonna had died in an accident involving

drinking and boating). "Um, about that bridge," he offered,

"couldn't that Black Rider fellow just ride across and attack

us on the other side?"

"Samwise, my butt," grumbled Morrie to himself, "Samfool

is more like it." Aloud he answered, "It's clearly posted that

you have to take boats eastbound, and since this is the last boat,

we'll be safe."

Peering into the murk, Sam could just make out a dark figure

walking around on the west bank. The figure moved towards the

bridge, but noticing a sign it turned dejectedly and disappeared

into the night.

"Here we are," declared Morrie as the ferry pulled into its

slip. "Coming, Sam?" Looking around, Sam realized that Pipsqueak

and Frodo had already scrambled ashore. "C'mon, Sam, Crickhollow

is just around the corner and Fatty's getting dinner on."

Entering Crickhollow, Frodo could tell that his friends had taken

great pains to set it up just like his old home at Bag End. All of

his posters were already up on the walls, his fish were swimming happily

in an aquarium set up in the corner, and they had even left a pile of

his dirty laundry beside the T.V. He felt ashamed that they'd gone to

all of this work and he was going to have to leave them.

"Dinner smells great," said Pipsqueak to Fatty, who was just coming

out of the kitchen, "but after sleeping under a tree last night I need

to wash up first. It's bath time."

"Which order shall we go in," said Frodo. "Smartest first, or cutest

first? You'll be last either way, Master Pipsqueak."

"No fear!" said Merry, "There are two tubs back there. You're left

with the shower, though, Sam. In a class-based society such as this you

really can't expect a servant-boy like you to enjoy the same luxuries as

your betters."

As the three travelers filed back to the washroom, Sam was muttering

something about ". . . first one up against the wall when the revolution

comes." Soon, though, the sound of splashing and wallowing was mixed

with the sound of Pipsqueak's favorite bathing song.

Rubber Ducky, you're the one,

You make bathtime lots of fun,

Rubber Ducky, I'm awfully fond of you;

(woh woh, bee doh!)

Rubber Ducky, joy of joys,

When I squeeze you, you make noise!

Rubber Ducky, you're my very best friend, it's true!

(doo doo doo doooo, doo doo)

Rubber Ducky, you're so fine

And I'm lucky that you're mine

Rubber ducky, I'm awfully fond of -

Rubber ducky, I'd like a whole pond of -

Rubber ducky I'm awfully fond of you!

There was a terrific flush, and a shout of "Whoa!" from Sam as he was scalded

in the shower. It wasn't long before all three were drawn back to the dining

room by the smell of Fatty's roasted mushrooms.

Now, if you've ever met a hobbit, you know that they love to eat. For such

little guys, they can pack away a lot of food, which is why you'd better

be sure

you've a well-stocked larder before inviting a hobbit home for the weekend.

Above all, though, hobbits loved mushrooms. Hobbit gourmands had identified

seven hundred and thirty eight varieties of edible mushrooms, and from the

look of his waistline, you could tell that Fatty was familiar with them all.

He'd prepared a sumptuous six course feast based completely around fungus.

He started with a nice little appetizer of mushrooms stuffed with cheese,

followed by a salad of morels, stir fried shitakes, grilled portabellos, and

roasted truffles. He ended it all with mushroom ice cream, but curiously

everyone decided they were full at that point, and pulled their chairs around

the fireplace to talk.

"Well, I'm not sure exactly how to say this . . ." started Frodo when

Pipsqueak interrupted.

"Years from now," he began, "when someone writes the story of our

adventures, no one is going to want to dwell on this scene. They'll want to

move ahead into the action, so let's not draw this out. Let's just pretend

that you already know that we know all about the Ring . . . "

"But how?" protested Frodo.

"Do you think we're idiots?" Morrie piped in. "You'd never have a chance

with Pipsqueak's cousin Cassiopiea without magical help. You're my

friend, man, but I've got to say that you've got a face only a mother

could love. A blind mother."

"Anyway," continued Pipsqueak, "let's just pretend that we've already

told you we're going with you, you've protested, and we've insisted.

Sam's nice and all, but let's face it, he's a bit of a stick in the mud.

Adventures will be a lot more fun with Morrie and I along."

"You are a set of scoundrels!" cried Frodo. "Bless you one and all."

They all danced around Frodo (not that there's anything wrong with

that) and Morrie and Pipsqueak started a song they'd apparently

composed for the occasion.

Farewell we call to hearth and hall!

To hobbit lasses one and all.

To Cassiopiea, Mary Jane,

To Beth, and Ruth, and sweet Lorraine.

To the wafflefoot twins with kisses sweet,

To all the gals with those sexy bare furry feet.

Someday we'll return to this corner of the world,

And maybe even Sam will meet a nice hobbit girl.

For now we're off on a quest of sorts,

To meet the women found in exotic ports.

We might find elf-maids with pointy ears,

Or even kiss dwarf girls (after eight or nine beers).

We must be gone, we must be gone.

We leave before the crack of dawn!

"Actually, guys, if it's okay with you, could we wait until about nine

or so?" asked Frodo. "I'm exhausted."

"Well, of course we'll sleep in. 'Nine' just doesn't rhyme. 'We must

be gone, we must be gone, we leave before the crack of nine'? Old Bilbo

would have never let me get by with a song like that," said Morrie. "I've

got it all set up. We'll wake up at nine, Fatty will make up a nice breakfast

of mushroom omelets, Sam will pack all of our bags while we have a nice

leisurely smoke, and we'll be gone by noon. Our route takes us hiking through

the Old Forest."

Fatty suddenly went pale. "Wait a minute! No one told me anything about

the Forest! I can't go in there, I'm afraid of trees!"

"You're afraid of trees? What kind of pansy are you?" demanded Frodo.

"If you can't handle a few trees, you're not going to do us much good on

the road. Maybe you should stay behind and tell Gandalf where to find us."

Fatty seemed relieved that everyone agreed to this plan. After some

final preparations, they all settled down to bed.

After tossing and turning for some time, Frodo finally settled down

into an uneasy sleep. Eventually he fell into a vague dream in which he

seemed to be looking out of a high window over a dark sea of tangled trees.

When he turned away from the window to face the classroom, he noticed he

wasn't wearing any clothes. Just then, the teacher started to pass out

an exam that he hadn't studied for. In a panic, he woke up.

Frodo woke suddenly. It was still dark in the room, and he

felt almost as if he were falling. A moment later he hit the

floor. Blearily he looked up to see the light of a candle flame

burning in the doorway. "What? What is it?" said Frodo, still

shaken and bewildered.

Out of the fire there spoke a voice. "What is it!" cried

Morrie. "I have been pounding on your door for five minutes.

It's nearly ten, Fatty's eaten half your breakfast and we must be

leaving soon. You'll have to make do with the scraps while I get

the ponies ready."

It was, of course, not so bad as all that. Fatty had prepared

more than enough for a hobbit twice Frodo's size and there was

plenty left. So Frodo had a nice breakfast with eggs and sausages

while the others finished preparations for the journey ahead.

Soon after twelve o'clock the five hobbits were ready to

start. Frodo was still yawning. Morrie went in front leading an

overburdened pony, and took his way along a path that went through

a small grove behind the house, and then trampled across several

fields.

In a shed they found their ponies: four sturdy beasts of the

kind loved by hobbits. They mounted, and were soon riding along

under the midday sun. Ahead of them loomed the Hedge.

"How are you going to get through the Hedge?" asked Fatty.

"I will show you!" said Morrie. He turned left along the

Hedge, and they came to a ramp leading down. A passage had been

dug into the earth and walled with brick, forming a tunnel leading

under the Hedge and into the Forest on the far side.

Here Fatty stopped, quailing at the sight of the trees. "Good-

bye friends!" he said. "I wish you were not going into the

Forest. I'm afraid there won't be anyone to rescue you, but good

luck to you."

"Tell Gandalf to go along the East Road; we shall soon be back

on it ourselves," said Frodo. They waved and disappeared into the

tunnel.

They passed a gate on the far side and Morrie locked it behind

them.

"Well!" said Morrie. "We have left the Shire, and are now on

the edge of the Old Forest."

"Are the stories true?" asked Pipsqueak, casting a glance back

to the tunnel.

"I don't know which stories you mean," answered Morrie. "I

don't believe those old bogey stories such as Fatty's nurses used

to tell him. Goblins and wolves and walking trees! No, I don't

think so, but the Forest is queer. Sometimes you'll feel someone

watching you, but when you look about there's no one there. There

are queer things living deep in the Forest, and in the downs on the

far side and someone makes tracks amongst the trees. Not far from

this tunnel there should be a path which will take us northeast

through the Forest. Due east would put us onto the Downs and south

would take us to the Witherwander River which starts out on the

Downs and joins the Brandywine in the south of the Forest. No

hobbit has ever charted its full course. We don't want to go THAT

way! The Witherwander valley is the worst part of the whole wood -

full of bogs and swamps, sinking sands and unfriendly creatures."

The hobbits now left the Hedge and rode up another ramp to the

floor of the Forest. The trees were thick about them almost

immediately, trunks of innumerable sizes and shapes: straight or

bent, twisted, leaning, squat or slender, smooth or gnarled and

branched or branchless, clustered or scattered, tall, short,

lightning scarred, intertwined, infested, bewebbed, mossy, dark,

damp, shimmering, peeling, vine covered, young or old, flowering,

deciduous, coniferous, fruit bearing, creaking, cracked, hollow,

budding and dying, burned, slimy, shaggy, scaley, green, grey,

brown, and, well, just a very lot of different kinds of trees.

They went on for some time, the ponies carefully picking their

way through the twisted and interlacing roots. The ground rose

steadily, and as they went forward it seemed as if the trees became

taller, darker, thicker, danker, and a great many other ominous

adverbs as well. They could catch only occasional glimpses of the

Sun through the thick trees overhead, and each time they did they

seemed to have veered somewhat off course and would have to turn

again to the northeast. After an hour or two the trees closed

overhead completely, wrapping them in a twilight gloom that left

them guessing at their direction and able to do little more than

move steadily forward.

The afternoon was wearing away when they stumbled into a deep

fold in the ground. It was so steep and overhung that it proved

impossible to climb out of, in either direction, without leaving

their ponies behind. As that would require carrying their own

food, and rather alot of it at that, it was completely out of the

question. All they could do was to follow the fold - downwards.

The ground grew soft, and in places boggy, and soon they found

themselves following a brook that trickled and babbled through a

weedy bed.

There was not yet any sign of a path, and the others began to

wonder if Morrie were not completely lost. Pipsqueak suddenly

felt that he could not bear it any longer, and without warning let

out a shout. "Oi! Ai! Ee!" he cried. No one was quite sure why.

"You don't have any idea where you are going, do you!"

Morrie shot him a venomous look, a glare that would have

warned any of his business associates against further words. "I

should not shout if I were you," said Morrie.

Pipsqueak, however, was undeterred. "It has not taken you long

to lose us!" Morrie's face became grim and he nudged his pony

forward with blood in his eyes. It might have gone badly for

Pipsqueak then, but just as Morrie was drawing close Sam let out a

whistle and pointed ahead.

"Look, isn't that an opening up ahead?" asked Sam.

A short distance ahead the gully came to an end and led quite

suddenly out of the gloom. The stream flowed down into a dark

river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over

with willows, blocked with fallen willows, flecked with thousands

of faded willow leaves, and otherwise heavily bewillowed. The late

afternoon sun shone golden through the break in the trees,

illuminating a faint footpath running along the bank of the river.

"Well, I know precisely where we are," said Morrie, speaking

quickly before any more comments about his navigational abilities

might be made. "This is the River Witherwander! We have strayed

just a little from our path." Pipsqueak looked about to protest,

but Morrie spoke on unheeding. "Perhaps there is some truth to

those old stories about the trees moving of their own accord after

all. They could have cut off our path and herded us here. That

must be it."

Seeing nothing else for it, the hobbits filed out and Morrie

led them down to the riverside. There they stopped to water the

ponies and take a brief rest. The long ride had worn them down and

the soft grass beneath the willow trees was a welcome change of

seating as they refilled their own water bottles. They yawned,

lightly at first, weariness seeming to creep over them now that

they could take a break at last.

Frodo felt his chin go down and his head nod. Off to his side

Morrie and Pipsqueak had wandered over to a great knotted old

willow and were resting against it. Sam had stopped, pretty much

where his pony had, and sat blinking stupidly about himself.

Frodo felt that some cool water might help revive him and

wandered towards the riverbank, half in a daze. He did not even

know he had reached the riverbank until he tripped over a root of

the old willow and fell headfirst into the water with a great

splash. He broke back to the surface a moment later, gasping and

sputtering. "Help! Help!", he cried, as he attempted

ineffectually to reach the shore. As the slow current carried him

away Frodo could see his friends half stirring in response to his

cries, but then settling back into weary sleep.

Choking now and fearing he would follow his parents into a

watery grave Frodo thought he dimly heard a voice as he drifted out

of sight and conciousness: a deep glad voice, singing carelessly

and happily:

Hey doll! merry doll! ring a ding dial-O!

Ring a ding! hop along! follow the willow!

Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadildo!

With a last gasp of effort Frodo kicked himself to the surface

of the water and cried out once more before sinking beneath the

surface. He felt the cold darkness settle over him, and knew no

more.

Until a moment later when he was pulled coughing and sputtering

from the water by strong hands. He hung helplessly, spitting up

water and a tragically large portion of his breakfast, before he

could begin to breathe normally again and get his first clear look

at his rescuer.

It was a man, or so he seemed. At any rate he was too large

and heavy for an ordinary hobbit, if not quite tall enough for one

of the Big People. He had a long brown beard; his eyes were blue

and bright, and his face was red as a ripe apple. He wore yellow

boots, a blue coat and a battered hat with a tall crown and a long

blue feather stuck in the band. In his free hand (Frodo was

dangling precariously from the other) he carried on a large leaf as

on a tray a pile of white water-lilies and a small doll. Frodo

found himself noting that the doll looked much like the man

himself, save that its hat seemed to sport a peacock feather rather

than a kingfisher.

"Whoa! steady there!" cried the old man, and Frodo stopped

squirming as if he had been struck stiff. "Now, my little fellow.

Where be you a-going to, breathing like a fish? What's the matter

here then? Do you know who I am? I'm Tom Bombadil."

"My friends and I were lost. I fell in the water and they all

went to sleep. I could have drowned!" cried Frodo breathlessly.

"What?" shouted Tom Bombadil, leaping up in the air and giving

Frodo quite a jolt. "Friends napping when help is being needed?

Let's go and see this." He set Frodo down and they made their way

back up the path to where the other hobbits were sleeping.

Tom let out a great laugh and sang a bit of his nonsense rhyme,

though Frodo looked fit to boil. The three hobbits woke and sat

up, rubbing thier eyes at this strange apparition.

"Frodo!" cried Sam, seeing his master all wet and bedraggled.

"What happened?"

"What happened?" yelled Frodo with some heat. "I nearly

drowned while you three had a nice nap."

The three jumped up, all trying to explain at once: "We were

bespelled!", "The sleep...", "I just closed my eyes for a moment!",

"Why'd you go fall in the water anyway..."

Looking around Sam suddenly pointed at the great grey willow

under which they had all slept. "That... that there willow, it

must be one of those walking trees. I'd bet it put us all to sleep

I would!" The others gaped and then nodded quickly in agreement.

Tom regarded the hobbits with great amusement and laughed

again. "Oh, the old 'willow-man' was it? Well, that's as may be,

but Tom Bombadil must be going. You should all come home with me.

The table is laden with yellow cream, honeycomb, and white bread

and butter. Goldberry is waiting. You follow me as quick as you

are able." With that he gave a beckoning wave and went hopping and

dancing along the path eastward, still singing loudly and

nonsensically.

Hey! Come merry doll! daring doll! My darling!

Hop along little friends, up the Witherwander.

Tom's going on ahead to get the ponies fodder.

Goldberry will make the beds and set the board,

With bread and honey and sweet delights, the River daughter.

Hey now! merry doll! We'll be waiting for you!

They all stared after him for a long moment, but the promise of

food and good beds would draw any hobbit. And so they started

after him, still arguing amongst themselves:

"You know, now that I think of it... that willow root that

tripped me DID seem to move of its own accord."

"I think he was an entwife," opined Pipsqueak.

"A what?"

"An entwife. Old Bilbo told me a story about them... no, not

one of THOSE stories."

Up ahead the trees parted and a house lay beneath the dark

shapes of the Barrow-downs. Golden light spilled out over the

threshold and they hurried forward.