through the forest is your way now. Don’t stray off the track!—if you do, it is a thousand to one you will never find it again and never get out of Mirkwood; and then I don’t suppose I, or any one else, will ever see you again.”

“Do we really have to go through?” groaned the hobbit.

“Yes, you do!” said the wizard, “if you want to get to the other side. You must either go through or give up your quest. And I am not going to allow you to back out now, Mr. Baggins. I am ashamed of you for thinking of it. You have got to look after all these dwarves for me,” he laughed.

“No! no!” said Bilbo. “I didn’t mean that. I meant, is there no way round?”

“There is, if you care to go two hundred miles or so out of your way north, and twice that south. But you wouldn’t get a safe path even then. There are no safe paths in this part of the world. Remember you are over the Edge of the Wild now, and in for all sorts of fun wherever you go. Before you could get round Mirkwood in the North you would be right among the slopes of the Grey Mountains, and they are simply stiff with goblins, hobgoblins, and orcs of the worst description. Before you could get round it in the South, you would get into the land of the Necromancer; and even you, Bilbo, won’t need me to tell you tales of that black sorcerer. I don’t advise you to go anywhere near the places overlooked by his dark tower! Stick to the forest-track, keep your spirits up, hope
for the best, and with a tremendous slice of luck you may come out one day and see the Long Marshes lying below you, and beyond them, high in the East, the Lonely Mountain where dear old Smaug lives, though I hope he is not expecting you.”

“Very comforting you are to be sure,” growled Thorin. “Good-bye! If you won’t come with us, you had better get off without any more talk!”

“Good-bye then, and really good-bye!” said Gandalf, and he turned his horse and rode down into the West. But he could not resist the temptation to have the last word. Before he had passed quite out of hearing he turned and put his hands to his mouth and called to them. They heard his voice come faintly: “Good-bye! Be good, take care of yourselves—and DON’T LEAVE THE PATH!”

Then he galloped away and was soon lost to sight. “O good-bye and go away!” grunted the dwarves, all the more angry because they were really filled with dismay at losing him. Now began the most dangerous part of all the journey. They each shouldered the heavy pack and the water-skin which was their share, and turned from the light that lay on the lands outside and plunged into the forest.
Chapter VIII

FLIES AND SPIDERS

They walked in single file. The entrance to the path was like a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel made by two great trees that leant together, too old and strangled with ivy and hung with lichen to bear more than a few blackened leaves. The path itself was narrow and wound in and out among the trunks. Soon the light at the gate was like a little bright hole far behind, and the quiet was so deep that their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened.

As their eyes became used to the dimness they could see a little way to either side in a sort of darkened green glimmer. Occasionally a slender beam of sun that had the luck to slip in through some opening in the leaves far above, and still more luck in not being caught in the tangled boughs and matted twigs beneath, stabbed down thin and
bright before them. But this was seldom, and it soon ceased altogether.

There were black squirrels in the wood. As Bilbo’s sharp inquisitive eyes got used to seeing things he could catch glimpses of them whisking off the path and scuttling behind tree-trunks. There were queer noises too, grunts, scufflings, and hurryings in the undergrowth, and among the leaves that lay piled endlessly thick in places on the forest-floor; but what made the noises he could not see. The nastiest things they saw were the cobwebs: dark dense cobwebs with threads extraordinarily thick, often stretched from tree to tree, or tangled in the lower branches on either side of them. There were none stretched across the path, but whether because some magic kept it clear, or for what other reason they could not guess.

It was not long before they grew to hate the forest as heartily as they had hated the tunnels of the goblins, and it seemed to offer even less hope of any ending. But they had to go on and on, long after they were sick for a sight of the sun and of the sky, and longed for the feel of wind on their faces. There was no movement of air down under the forest-roof, and it was everlastingly still and dark and stuffy. Even the dwarves felt it, who were used to tunnelling, and lived at times for long whiles without the light of the sun; but the hobbit, who liked holes to make a house in but not to spend summer days in, felt that he was being slowly suffocated.
The nights were the worst. It then became pitch-dark—not what you call pitch-dark, but really pitch: so black that you really could see nothing. Bilbo tried flapping his hand in front of his nose, but he could not see it at all. Well, perhaps it is not true to say that they could see nothing: they could see eyes. They slept all closely huddled together, and took it in turns to watch; and when it was Bilbo’s turn he would see gleams in the darkness round them, and sometimes pairs of yellow or red or green eyes would stare at him from a little distance, and then slowly fade and disappear and slowly shine out again in another place. And sometimes they would gleam down from the branches just above him; and that was most terrifying. But the eyes that he liked the least were horrible pale bulbous sort of eyes. “Insect eyes,” he thought, “not animal eyes, only they are much too big.”

Although it was not yet very cold, they tried lighting watch-fires at night, but they soon gave that up. It seemed to bring hundreds and hundreds of eyes all round them, though the creatures, whatever they were, were careful never to let their bodies show in the little flicker of the flames. Worse still it brought thousands of dark-grey and black moths, some nearly as big as your hand, flapping and whirring round their ears. They could not stand that, nor the huge bats, black as a top-hat, either; so they gave up fires and sat at night and dozed in the enormous uncanny darkness.
All this went on for what seemed to the hobbit ages upon ages; and he was always hungry, for they were extremely careful with their provisions. Even so, as days followed days, and still the forest seemed just the same, they began to get anxious. The food would not last for ever: it was in fact already beginning to get low. They tried shooting at the squirrels, and they wasted many arrows before they managed to bring one down on the path. But when they roasted it, it proved horrible to taste, and they shot no more squirrels.

They were thirsty too, for they had none too much water, and in all the time they had seen neither spring nor stream. This was their state when one day they found their path blocked by a running water. It flowed fast and strong but not very wide right across the way, and it was black, or looked it in the gloom. It was well that Beorn had warned them against it, or they would have drunk from it, whatever its colour, and filled some of their emptied skins at its bank. As it was they only thought of how to cross it without wetting themselves in its water. There had been a bridge of wood across, but it had rotted and fallen leaving only the broken posts near the bank.

Bilbo kneeling on the brink and peering forward cried: “There is a boat against the far bank! Now why couldn’t it have been this side!”
“How far away do you think it is?” asked Thorin, for by now they knew Bilbo had the sharpest eyes among them.

“Not at all far. I shouldn’t think above twelve yards.”

“Twelve yards! I should have thought it was thirty at least, but my eyes don’t see as well as they used a hundred years ago. Still twelve yards is as good as a mile. We can’t jump it, and we daren’t try to wade or swim.”

“Can any of you throw a rope?”

“What’s the good of that? The boat is sure to be tied up, even if we could hook it, which I doubt.”

“I don’t believe it is tied,” said Bilbo, “though of course I can’t be sure in this light; but it looks to me as if it was just drawn up on the bank, which is low just there where the path goes down into the water.”

“Dori is the strongest, but Fili is the youngest and still has the best sight,” said Thorin. “Come here Fili, and see if you can see the boat Mr. Baggins is talking about.”

Fili thought he could; so when he had stared a long while to get an idea of the direction, the others brought him a rope. They had several with them, and on the end of the longest they fastened one of the large iron hooks they had used for catching their packs to the straps about their shoulders. Fili took this in his hand, balanced it for a moment, and then flung it across the stream.

Splash it fell in the water! “Not far enough!” said Bilbo who was peering forward. “A couple of feet and you would have
dropped it on to the boat. Try again. I don’t suppose the magic is strong enough to hurt you, if you just touch a bit of wet rope.”

Fili picked up the hook when he had drawn it back, rather doubtfully all the same. This time he threw it with great strength.

“Steady!” said Bilbo, “you have thrown it right into the wood on the other side now. Draw it back gently.” Fili hauled the rope back slowly, and after a while Bilbo said: “Carefully! It is lying on the boat; let’s hope the hook will catch.”

It did. The rope went taut, and Fili pulled in vain. Kili came to his help, and then Oin and Gloin. They tugged and tugged, and suddenly they all fell over on their backs. Bilbo was on the look out, however, caught the rope, and with a piece of stick fended off the little black boat as it came rushing across the stream. “Help!” he shouted, and Balin was just in time to seize the boat before it floated off down the current.

“It was tied after all,” said he, looking at the snapped painter that was still dangling from it. “That was a good pull, my lads; and a good job that our rope was the stronger.”

“Who’ll cross first?” asked Bilbo.

“I shall,” said Thorin, “and you will come with me, and Fili and Balin. That’s as many as the boat will hold at a time. After that Kili and Oin and Gloin and Dori; next Ori and Nori, Bifur and Bofur; and last Dwalin and Bombur.”

“I’m always last and I don’t like it,” said Bombur. “It’s somebody else’s turn today.”