can! If you can’t, hoot twice like a barn-owl and once like a screech-owl, and we will do what we can.”

Off Bilbo had to go, before he could explain that he could not hoot even once like any kind of owl any more than fly like a bat. But at any rate hobbits can move quietly in woods, absolutely quietly. They take a pride in it, and Bilbo had sniffed more than once at what he called “all this dwarvish racket,” as they went along, though I don’t suppose you or I would have noticed anything at all on a windy night, not if the whole cavalcade had passed two feet off. As for Bilbo walking primly towards the red light, I don’t suppose even a weasel would have stirred a whisker at it. So, naturally, he got right up to the fire—for fire it was—without disturbing anyone. And this is what he saw.

Three very large persons sitting round a very large fire of beech-logs. They were toasting mutton on long spits of wood, and licking the gravy off their fingers. There was a fine toothsome smell. Also there was a barrel of good drink at hand, and they were drinking out of jugs. But they were trolls. Obviously trolls. Even Bilbo, in spite of his sheltered life, could see that: from the great heavy faces of them, and their size, and the shape of their legs, not to mention their language, which was not drawing-room fashion at all, at all.

“Mutton yesterday, mutton today, and blimey, if it don’t look like mutton again tommorrer,” said one of the trolls.
“Never a blinking bit of manflesh have we had for long enough,” said a second. “What the ’ell William was a-thinkin’ of to bring us into these parts at all, beats me—and the drink runnin’ short, what’s more,” he said jogging the elbow of William, who was taking a pull at his jug.

William choked. “Shut yer mouth!” he said as soon as he could. “Yer can’t expect folk to stop here for ever just to be et by you and Bert. You’ve et a village and a half between yer, since we come down from the mountains. How much more d’y’er want? And time’s been up our way, when yer’d have said ‘thank yer Bill’ for a nice bit o’ fat valley mutton like what this is.” He took a big bite off a sheep’s leg he was roasting, and wiped his lips on his sleeve.

Yes, I am afraid trolls do behave like that, even those with only one head each. After hearing all this Bilbo ought to have done something at once. Either he should have gone back quietly and warned his friends that there were three fair-sized trolls at hand in a nasty mood, quite likely to try roasted dwarf, or even pony, for a change; or else he should have done a bit of good quick burgling. A really first-class and legendary burglar would at this point have picked the trolls’ pockets—it is nearly always worth while, if you can manage it—, pinched the very mutton off the spits, purloined the beer, and walked off without their noticing him. Others more practical but with less professional pride would perhaps have stuck a dag-
ger into each of them before they observed it. Then the night could have been spent cheer-ily.

Bilbo knew it. He had read of a good many things he had never seen or done. He was very much alarmed, as well as disgusted; he wished himself a hundred miles away, and yet—and yet somehow he could not go straight back to Thorin and Company emptyhanded. So he stood and hesitated in the shadows. Of the various burglary proceedings he had heard of picking the trolls' pockets seemed the least difficult, so at last he crept behind a tree just behind William.

Bert and Tom went off to the barrel. William was having another drink. Then Bilbo plucked up courage and put his little hand in William's enormous pocket. There was a purse in it, as big as a bag to Bilbo. "Ha!" thought he, warming to his new work as he lifted it carefully out, "this is a beginning!"

It was! Trolls' purses are the mischief, and this was no exception. "'Ere, 'oo are you?" it squeaked, as it left the pocket; and William turned round at once and grabbed Bilbo by the neck, before he could duck behind the tree.

"Blimey, Bert, look what I've copped!" said William.

"What is it?" said the others coming up.
"Lumme, if I knows! What are yer?"
"Bilbo Baggins, a bur—a hobbit," said poor Bilbo, shaking all over, and wondering how to make owl-noises before they throttled him.
“A burrahobbit?” said they a bit startled. Trolls are slow in the uptake, and mighty suspicious about anything new to them.

“What’s a burrahobbit got to do with my pocket, anyways?” said William.

“And can yer cook ’em?” said Tom.

“Yer can try,” said Bert, picking up a skewer.

“He wouldn’t make above a mouthful,” said William, who had already had a fine supper, “not when he was skinned and boned.”

“P’raps there are more like him round about, and we might make a pie,” said Bert. “Here you, are there any more of your sort a-sneakin’ in these here woods, yer nassty little rabbit,” said he looking at the hobbit’s furry feet; and he picked him up by the toes and shook him.

“Yes, lots,” said Bilbo, before he remembered not to give his friends away. “No none at all, not one,” he said immediately afterwards.

“What d’yer mean?” said Bert, holding him right way up, by the hair this time.

“What I say,” said Bilbo gasping. “And please don’t cook me, kind sirs! I am a good cook myself, and cook better than I cook, if you see what I mean. I’ll cook beautifully for you, a perfectly beautiful breakfast for you, if only you won’t have me for supper.”

“Poor little blighter,” said William. He had already had as much supper as he could hold; also he had had lots of beer. “Poor little blighter! Let him go!”
“Not till he says what he means by lots and none at all,” said Bert. “I don’t want to have me throat cut in me sleep! Hold his toes in the fire, till he talks!”

“I won’t have it,” said William. “I caught him anyway.”

“You’re a fat fool, William,” said Bert, “as I’ve said afore this evening.”

“And you’re a lout!”

“And I won’t take that from you, Bill Huggins,” says Bert, and puts his fist in William’s eye.

Then there was a gorgeous row. Bilbo had just enough wits left, when Bert dropped him on the ground, to scramble out of the way of their feet, before they were fighting like dogs, and calling one another all sorts of perfectly true and applicable names in very loud voices. Soon they were locked in one another’s arms, and rolling nearly into the fire kicking and thumping, while Tom whacked at them both with a branch to bring them to their senses—and that of course only made them madder than ever.

That would have been the time for Bilbo to have left. But his poor little feet had been very squashed in Bert’s big paw, and he had no breath in his body, and his head was going round; so there he lay for a while panting, just outside the circle of firelight.

Right in the middle of the fight up came Balin. The dwarves had heard noises from a distance, and after waiting for some time for Bilbo to come back, or to hoot like an owl, they started off one by one to creep towards