

# Riddles in the Dark

By J. R. R. Tolkien

Adapted for reader's theatre from *The Hobbit*, Houghton Mifflin, 1966

GENRE: Fantasy

CULTURE: —

THEME: Little guy vs. big; riddles

GRADE LEVEL: 5-9

ROLES: 6

TIME: 10 min.

ROLES: Narrator 1, Narrator 2, Narrator 3, Narrator 4, Bilbo, Gollum

NOTE: J. R. R. Tolkien is author of both *The Hobbit* and the Lord of the Rings trilogy. In this selection from *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins finds the ring on which the later trilogy is based. For best effect, position BILBO closest to NARRATORS 1 and 2, and GOLLUM closest to NARRATORS 3 and 4. The noise that gives Gollum his name is a loud swallowing sound.

NARRATOR 1: When Bilbo opened his eyes, he wondered if he really had—for it was as dark as with his eyes shut. No one was anywhere near. He could hear nothing, see nothing, and he could feel nothing except the stone floor.

NARRATOR 4: Very slowly he got up and groped about on all fours till he touched the wall of the tunnel. His head was swimming, and he was far from certain even of the direction he had been going when he had fallen. He guessed as well as he could, and crawled along for a good way.

NARRATOR 2: Suddenly his hand met what felt like a tiny ring of cold metal, lying on the floor of the tunnel.

NARRATOR 3: It was a turning point in his life, but he did not know it. He put the ring in his pocket almost without thinking.

NARRATOR 1: He went only a little further, then sat down on the cold floor. He could not think what to do. Nor could he think what had happened, or why he had been left behind, or even why his head was so sore. But after awhile he drew out his little elvish sword, and somehow it comforted him.

BILBO: Go back? No good at all! Go sideways? Impossible! Go forward? The only thing to do! On we go!

NARRATOR 4: So up he got, and trotted along with his sword held in front of him and one hand feeling the wall. On and on he went, down and down.

NARRATOR 2: Suddenly, he trotted without warning into icy cold water. That pulled him up sharp.

NARRATOR 3: He stopped and listened hard, and he could hear drops, drip-drip-dripping from an unseen roof into the water below. But there was no sound of water flowing.

BILBO: So it must be a pool or a lake. Hmm. (*sits to think*)



NARRATOR 1: Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum, a small, slimy creature. He was dark as darkness, except for two big, round, pale eyes in his thin face. He lived on a slimy island of rock in the middle of the lake. Bilbo could not see him, but Gollum was watching him now from the distance, with his pale eyes like telescopes.

NARRATOR 4: Gollum got into his little boat and shot off from the island. He paddled it with his large feet dangling over the side, but never a ripple did he make. Bilbo was sitting on the water's brink, at the end of his way and his wits, when up paddled Gollum, his eyes glowing softly in the dark.

GOLLUM: Ssssss.

NARRATOR 2: Bilbo jumped nearly out of his skin. He thrust the sword in front of him.

GOLLUM: Bless us and splash us, my precioussss! I guess it's a choice feast! At least, a tasty *morsel* it'd make us. *Gollum*.

BILBO: Who *are* you?

GOLLUM: (*to himself*) What *iss* he, my precious?

BILBO: I am Mr. Bilbo Baggins. I have lost the dwarves and the wizard, and I don't know where I am!

GOLLUM: What's he got in his handses?

BILBO: A sword! A blade made by the elves in the Goblin Wars!

GOLLUM: Ssss. Praps ye sits here and *chats* with it a bitsy, my preciousss. It likes riddles, praps it does, does it?

NARRATOR 3: Gollum was anxious to appear friendly until he found out more about the sword and the hobbit—whether he was quite alone, and whether he was good to eat.

BILBO: Very well.

NARRATOR 1: ...said Bilbo, who was anxious to agree until he found out more about the creature—whether he was quite alone, and whether he was fierce or hungry.

BILBO: (*sits again*) You ask first.

NARRATOR 4: So Gollum hissed,

GOLLUM:  
What has roots as nobody sees,  
Is taller than trees,  
Up, up it goes,  
And yet never grows?

BILBO: Easy! Mountain, I suppose.

GOLLUM: Does it guess easy? It must have a *competition* with us, my precious! If precious asks, and *it* doesn't answer, we *eats* it, my preciousss. If it asks *us*, and *we* doesn't answer, then we does what it wants, eh? We shows it the way out, yes!

BILBO: All right.

NARRATOR 2: ...said Bilbo, not daring to disagree, and nearly bursting his brain to think of riddles that could save him from being eaten. All he could think of was an old one.

BILBO:  
Thirty white horses on a red hill,  
First they champ,  
Then they stamp,  
Then they stand still.

GOLLUM: Teeth! Teeth! But *we* has only *six*, my precious.

NARRATOR 3: Then Gollum asked the second.

GOLLUM:  
Voiceless it cries,  
Wingless flutters,

Toothless bites,  
Mouthless mutters.

BILBO: Half a moment!

NARRATOR 1: ...cried Bilbo, who was still thinking uncomfortably about being eaten. Fortunately, he had once heard something like this before and, getting his wits back, he thought of the answer.

BILBO: Wind, wind, of course.

NARRATOR 2: Bilbo was so pleased that he made up one on the spot.

BILBO:  
An eye in a blue face  
Saw an eye in a green face.

"That eye is like to *this* eye,"  
Said the first eye,  
"But in low place,  
Not in high place."

GOLLUM: Ss, ss, ss.

NARRATOR 4: Gollum had been underground a long, long time, and was forgetting this sort of thing. But just as Bilbo was beginning to hope that the wretch would not be able to answer, Gollum brought up memories of ages and ages ago.

GOLLUM: Sun on the daisies, it means, it does.

NARRATOR 3: These aboveground sort of riddles were tiring for Gollum, and they made him hungry too. So this time he tried something a bit more difficult and unpleasant.

GOLLUM:  
It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,  
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.

It lies behind stars and under hills,  
And empty holes it fills.

It comes first and follows after,  
Ends life, kills laughter.

NARRATOR 1: But Bilbo had heard that sort of thing before, and the answer was all around him anyway.

BILBO: Dark!

GOLLUM: Ssssss!

NARRATOR 2: Bilbo was still trying to think of a really hard one. To gain time, he asked one he thought would be easy.

BILBO:

A box without hinges, key, or lid,  
Yet golden treasure inside is hid.

NARRATOR 4: But Gollum hissed and spluttered and did not answer.

BILBO: Well, what is it?

GOLLUM: Give us a chance. Let it give us a chance, my preciousss-ss-ss.... Eggses!  
Eggses it is!

NARRATOR 3: Now Gollum thought it was time to ask something hard and horrible.

GOLLUM:

This thing all things devours  
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers

Gnaws iron, bites steel,  
Grinds hard stones to meal,

Slays king, ruins town,  
And beats high mountain down!

NARRATOR 1: Bilbo sat in the dark thinking of all the giants and ogres he had ever heard of, but not one of them had done all these things.

NARRATOR 2: He had a feeling that the answer was quite different and that he ought to know, but he could not think of it. He began to get frightened, and that is bad for thinking!

NARRATOR 4: Gollum began to get out of his boat. He flapped into the water and paddled to the bank.

NARRATOR 1: Bilbo could see the eyes coming towards him. His tongue seemed to stick in his mouth. He wanted to shout, "Give me more time! Give me time!" But all that came out was

BILBO: Time! Time!

GOLLUM: (*stops*) Ssssssss.

NARRATOR 2: Bilbo was saved by pure luck, for "time" was the answer!

NARRATOR 3: Gollum was getting angry, and also tired of the game. It had made him very hungry indeed. He sat down in the dark by Bilbo.

GOLLUM: It's got to ask us a quesstion, my preciouss, yes, yess, yesss. Jusst one more quesstion to guess, yes, yess.

NARRATOR 1: But Bilbo simply could not think of any question with that nasty, wet, cold thing sitting next to him, pawing and poking him. He scratched himself, he pinched himself. Still, he could think of nothing.

GOLLUM: *Ask us! Ask us!*

NARRATOR 2: Bilbo pinched himself and slapped himself and even felt in his pocket.

NARRATOR 1: There he found the ring he had picked up in the passage and forgotten.

BILBO: (*to himself*) What have I got in my pocket?

GOLLUM: Not fair! It isn't fair, my precious, is it, to ask us what it's got in its nassty little pocketeses?

NARRATOR 2: Bilbo had been talking to himself, but Gollum had thought it was a riddle. Having nothing better to ask, Bilbo stuck to his question.

BILBO: (*louder, to Gollum*) What have I got in my pocket?

GOLLUM: Sssssss. It must give us three guesseeses, my preciouss—three guesseeses.

BILBO: Very well! Guess away!

GOLLUM: Handses!

BILBO: Wrong! Guess again!

GOLLUM: Sssssss.

NARRATOR 4: Gollum thought of all the things he kept in his own pockets: fishbones, goblins' teeth, wet shells, a bit of bat-wing, a sharpening stone to sharpen his fangs on. He tried to think what other people kept in *their* pockets.

GOLLUM: Knife!

BILBO: Wrong! Last guess!

NARRATOR 3: Gollum hissed and spluttered and rocked backwards and forwards, slapped his feet on the floor, wriggled and squirmed. But he dared not waste his last guess.

BILBO: Time's up!

GOLLUM: String—or nothing!

BILBO: Both wrong!

NARRATOR 1: Bilbo jumped at once to his feet and held out his sword.

BILBO: And now you must show the way out!

GOLLUM: Ssssssssss!