

Chapter Two

ROAST MUTT



Bingo was woken by the smell of Gandef's pipe, the smoke of which caused a stinging sensation in the mucus membranes of his sinus and gave him a mixed impression of singed hair, burning bark and smoking rubber. The young soddit, coughing, pulled himself into a sitting position to find Gandef reclining lazily on the sofa.

'Good morning, young master Grabbings,' the wizard said genially, and sucked at the stem of his pipe so hard that his eyeballs shrank back in his skull.

'What time is it?' Bingo squeaked. But as he asked the question his eye lighted on the half-hunter squatting on the mantelpiece. The hour lacked some minutes of nine. He rubbed his eyes, and *some minutes* came into more precise focus as *fifty minutes*. 'Ten past eight?' he gasped. 'Ten past eight *in the morning?*' (Soddits, as I'm sure you know, like to sleep until noon – a habit so entrenched in their culture that the idea of a clockface having the dual function of 'a.m.' and 'p.m.' is for most of them only a notional and theoretical hypothesis.)

Gandef nodded intelligently. 'Bright and early,' he said. 'Ah! The first pipe of the day. The first is always the sweetest.' He took another drag.

‘Dwarfs!’ said Bingo, getting unsteadily to his feet. ‘Drink! Potweed! Hallucinations!’ His head felt like it had been turned inside out, had tent pegs hammered into it, and then folded back in on itself again.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Gandef indulgently. ‘It is late, I know. But Thorri didn’t have it in his heart to wake you. You looked so peaceful. But you’d better get a move on. Did you read the letter?’

‘What letter?’

‘Good. I’m glad that at least you read the letter.’

Bingo found the letter after a ten-minute search through the desolation and chaos that had once been his front room. Written upon the finest dwarfish parchment, a form of scraped and treated stone, it read as follows:

Honourable sir,

On the offchance that you have forgotten our arrangement, we beg to remind you that should you fail to present yourself at the Putting Dragon Inn at Byjingo by nine a.m. we would be obliged to consider you an enemy of all dwarfkind and would thereafter hunt you down and slay you like the vermin you are. At nine sharp, mind for we depart on our great quest eastward to confront the evil and condescending dragon Smug in his lair.

Yours dwarfully,
Thorri (King) and Company.

P.S. Mori begs to remind you that the purpose of our quest is *gold*, honestly, *gold*, lots of gold, and nothing else, certainly not anything non-gold.

‘Hunt me down and slay me like the vermin I am?’ said Bingo, a catch in his voice.

‘Lovely illumination on the “H” don’t you think?’ said Gandef, looking over the soddit’s shoulder. ‘That’s a little rugby ball flying through the top portion, and Barijon standing to the left of it. A great dwarfish hero, he.’

‘Will they really kill me if I don’t turn up?’

‘Oh no, of course not,’ said Gandef, shaking his head forcefully and chuckling a little. ‘No, no, nothing like that. On the other hand,’ he added, tamping some more tobacco into his pipe bowl, ‘they certainly will kill you if you don’t turn up. It’s a sort of dwarfish tradition, you see. Punctuality. That,’ he added, mysteriously, ‘and sheep.’

In a blind panic Bingo fled from his front room, stepping over the wreckage of his still-knocking door, and scurried along the main street of Hobbld-Ahoy! as fast as his sore feet would permit in the general direction of Byjingo.¹ He arrived at the Putting Dragon Inn with one minute to spare, panting and clutching at his agonised feet. The dwarfs were waiting for him,

¹The Jingo, upon which Byjingo is located, is a clear, fast-flowing stream that joins the Great River Flem a score of miles south-east of Hobbld-Ahoy!. Legend has it that the stream is named for its resemblance to an alcoholic drink of clear purity and great strength popular amongst the soddits. Flowing from the ice-capped northern mountains, through the fruit orchards of the County of the Hunchkins (to the north of Soddlesex), the Jingo often carries chunks of pure mountain ice, and bobbing whole lemons in its stream.

standing underneath the painted inn sign (which represented a trouser-clad dragon attempting to hole a tricky twenty-foot putt whilst a salamander stood in the background).²

‘Just in time, lad, la, boyo,’ said Mori, as the Byjingo town clock chimed the hour, or rather thudded once, which is what it did every hour of the day, ever since a bored soddit youth had stolen the bell to wear as a hat. And with that the dwarfs shouldered their packs and started away on their great quest, Bingo limping complainingly along behind them.

They stopped in Cremone to buy a beast of burden, a pack-animal called Bony – which name was (the salesman, ‘Honest Anthony’, insisted) a wittily ironic reference to his fat girth and good health, ‘like calling a really large feller called John Little John, you see,’ he said. Neither Bingo nor the dwarfs saw, but didn’t want to reveal their ignorance. None of them had much experience with ponies, and believed the salesman’s explanation that the protruding rib-like spars running round this creature’s torso were a form of

² Golf is a popular Soddlesex game. Its origins are to be found in ancient Soddit religion, a faith which involved worship of a deified potato, and to which attached a ritualised contest to plant next year’s crop by striking the potatoes one by one with a magic staff so that they flew into predug holes. This, it hardly needs adding, was a highly inefficient way of planting potatoes, and the potato crop was always very poor, something the soddits blamed on the anger of their god Spahd rather than their own incompetence.

protection against predation, somewhat after the manner of an armadillo. ‘Ain’t Mother Nature a wonderful thing?’ he added, as he pocketed their money.

Having loaded their supplies on to this one sorrowful beast the party made its way east, through gently rolling hills, gently downing downs, gently plating plateaus (plating in the sense that river, road and crops appeared to weave and unweave, drawing together and pulling apart as they crossed the land). By noon on the third day they had entered the Tiger Woods, where dangerous wild animals lurked in every sand trap, and where the potato game was originally invented. After many adventures, which I don’t have time to go into, they got out the other side of this dangerous and exclusive place. They travelled over the river Tim’s, named for one of the most famous legendary heroes of the Little Counties (Tim the Tiny, River-Namer), and into Ply Wood. Here the going got slower. Bingo had to sit down every thirty or forty yards to rest his feet, and the dwarfs became crotchety with the delay. Pilfur and Gofur finally picked him up between them and carried him, but he complained at the bumpiness of the ride and they dropped him.

By sunset of the following day³ the party had

⁰ I’d just like to say that the publishers have cut out *pages* and *pages* of my best stuff from here . . . I originally had the group enjoying all sorts of adventures in the Counties of the Little, fending off an attack of the Not Nice Mice, hurrying through the infestation of Piccadilly Flea Circus and the like. My favourite episode, which I begged and begged to keep in, but they didn’t listen to me, was all about the land of the Tellurite Tubbles – those hard, metallic tub-shaped creatures,

reached the Wood of Wooden Trees, and all were exhausted. The dwarfs had taken it in turns to carry the soddit, and had reached the end of their tether. In fact, they had tied a second tether to this end, and had reached the end of that too, which gives some indication of just how far they had gone. Really quite far, tether-wise, as I'm sure you will agree. Sadly their packhorse, Bony the tiny Pony, the only pony for sale in all of Cremona (sold them by phoney Tony the only pony-owner in Cremona) had fallen into the River Flem and drowned, carrying away nearly all their supplies. They were left only with a cauldron (that Tori was wearing as a helmet).

Dark fell as they made camp. It was a fell dark. Everybody in the company was hungry.

'You,' said Mori, prodding Bingo with the blunt end of his axe pole. 'Go and find us something to eat.'

'You're joking?' asked Bingo, rubbing a dock leaf on the soles of his aching feet. 'That's, you know, exactly like a joke, right?'

'There's firelight through the wooden trees,' said Gofur, pointing at a glowing splodge of orange light in the distance. 'Go and see who it is, and pinch some of their food, grabber, that's what you're here for, look you, a, yes, oo, bach, la, very.'

cyborg beings of terrifying inhumanity with computer screens inlaid in their torsos and weird shaped antenna coming out of their Upper Processing Units. Their ear-piercing cries of 'Annihilate! Annihilate!', 'You! Will Be! Annihilated!' and 'Tubble-tora-tora-tora-die-die-aaaiiee!' have charmed and delighted young children for many years.

The other dwarfs made various noises of agreement. Amongst these noises were grunts, growls, two 'I agrees', one 'yes, off you go boyo', one 'I should say *so*' and one 'Mavis!', but this last was from a dwarf already asleep and was probably unrelated to the matter in hand.

Bingo was too tired to argue the case. He crept, biting his lower lip to stifle his grunts of pain, through the wooden trees of the wood of trees, moving always towards the gleam of the firelight. Soon, with a minimum of snapping twig sounds, rustlings, hootings of disturbed ground-nesting birds, sotto voce 'ouches' and 'ows' and the like, he got to the edge of a small clearing, and had a clear view of who was warming themselves by the fire within it.

Trollops! Four, great, whopping, stony trollops. Enough to give even the bravest soddit the collywobbles. They were sitting in a circle, roasting three dogs over the open fire. 'Ah,' said the nearest of them, licking his lips with his massive, stony tongue, 'roast mutt again.'

'Yer likes yer roast mutt, don't you Burt?' said a second trollp.

'That I do, Gerd,' agreed Burt, pulling one of the carcasses from the fire, dripping and sizzling on a stick, and taking a great squelching bite from its flank.⁴

⁰The publishers have asked me to make it clear that they in no way endorse the cooking and eating of dogs, particularly not bassets, ladies, tramps, dogs that can say 'sausages' if you stick a thumb against their soft palate, the dog from the Famous Five or any other household-pet-style animal. Dogs are for Christmas, and for leaving on the side of the A308 in the new year, *not* for eating. *Cows* are the

Trollps, as you know, are fearsome creatures. It is now many years since they left their traditional sub-pontoon habitat, and their traditional diet of goats, to roam far and wide in search of a fuller sense of self-expression and some quick cash. They are of course gigantic in stature, five foot eleven is not uncommon and some are as tall as six foot one and a half, and their proportions are similarly huge, bellies like boulders, arms like the roots of great oak trees, a head that looks from a distance as if it's wearing a steel helmet until you get closer and realise that that's just the shape of the head. Trollps, being creatures of nature, grow a straggly moss on their chests, arms and legs; they grow a stubble of little thorns from their chins, but the tops of their heads are smooth as water-polished stone. Their eyes are red as garnets, and their brows are beetling – not in the sense of having independent legs and a tendency to scurry away, but rather in the sense of jutting or overhanging in a threatening manner.

ones for eating, not dogs. They're big enough to look out for themselves, after all, whereas a brown-eyed whimpering Jack Russell is not. Remember the slogan of the 'Dogs Are People Too' organisation: 'Dogs Are People Too!' (The 'Cows Are People Too' organisation slogan is far more equivocal: 'Cows Are People Too, Though Not Very Bright People, And We Got To Admit It People With Extremely Tasty Flesh When Roasted Or, Better, Grilled, And Served With A Mustard And Dill Sauce, Some Chips, String Beans, A Nice Glass Of Red Wine, Oooh, Go On Then It Won't Matter If We Have Just The One, There Are Millions Of Them In Big Sheds Up North').

These four hefty trollps had come down from the mountains hoping for some business from the north-western cart salesman and middle-farm-management population. They were dressed in the traditional costume of their race: lacy underwear, garter belts, stockings (made of the same wire mesh used by some to construct fences), little fluttery red silk skirts which tended to ride suggestively upwards in the slightest breeze – and which, if the breeze were anything more than slight, tended to become cummerbunds – and a saucy little French Trollection low-halter button-up top, also in red. Burt had personalised his outfit with a natty little silk-ribbon neck bow, very continental, and Bill – the tallest of the four – wore flats rather than the brick-heeled Ralph Lauren trolletto shoes of the others. Gerd wore elbow-length gloves that had been a bridal white once upon a time, although they had now gone a rather muddy pink colour in the wash on account of being put in the laundry with man-blood still on them one too many times. Old Gil, the fourth member of the group, was the master make-upper of the four. His slab-like lips were carefully outlined in fifteen pounds of lipstick, very fetching. His tiny glowing eyes were surrounded by four thick, tangled rows of eyelashes, giving him the appearance of having large and grotesquely overfed Venus fly traps fitted to the front of his face. Which, indeed, may have been how he achieved the effect.

Bingo had not enjoyed a hot meal since the day before, and his mouth started watering at the smell of

the roasting dog. He peered from behind a tree trunk, and slipped soundlessly to another tree trunk to get a better view, pressing himself close against this for cover and taking another cautious look. Sadly for him this last tree trunk was not a tree trunk at all, but Gerd's leg. He was suspended in midair, squealing and kicking his legs, before he knew what was happening.

'Hey! Crikey, blimey, love a duck and apples'n'pears,' said Gerd, displaying his catch to the rest of them. 'Look what I've found!' He pronounced this last word 'fanned', but Bingo assumed that he meant 'discovered by chance', 'obtained' rather than 'cooled by agitating the air with a fan'.

The trolls clustered round, and gave a few exploratory pokes of Bingo in the ribs with their massive fingers.

'A snack!' said Gil. 'Bags he's mine!'

'There's bare enough in 'im for a mouf-ful,' said Bill.

'Lumme, cor, 'Ackney and Bermondsey,' said Gerd, 'a mouf-ful is all I want.'

'But ooze?' challenged Burt. 'Ooze to get the mouf-ful?'

'I caught 'im,' said Gerd.

'I bags'd him fust,' said Gil.

'I say we draws lots,' said Bill.

'Lots of wot?' said Burt.

'Are there any *more* of you mouf-fuls round about?' asked Gil, bringing his great stone face close up to

Bingo's. The stench of Amour de Troll washed up the soddit's nose.

'No!' Bingo squeaked.

'Gah,' said Bill, grimacing. 'Bound to be,' said Gil, nodding.

With nary another word Bill, Gil and Burt lumbered off into the woods. Bingo, gasping, dangling in midair, consoled himself by thinking that the three trollps were making such a loud noise that the dwarfs would surely be warned of their approach. Then he thought that the dwarfs were fierce and hardy warriors and would quickly defeat the trollps, and his captors would soon be nothing but rubble. Sadly, he was wrong in both these thoughts. No more than ten minutes later the three trollps returned, each with a brace of dwarfs. All the members of Thorri's band had been tied with their own beards, a humiliating circumstance that did not so much add insult to injury as multiply insult plus injury by shame to the power of agony. When they were all deposited, like giant hairy pupae, in a pile by the fire Bingo was trussed with an old trollp garter belt, and placed on top of the heap.

'That's more like it,' said Gil, sitting down on the broad boulder he'd been using as a stool and rubbing his great stony hands together at the fire, sending stone chips skittering into the air. 'That's a feast, that is.'

'Dwarfs,' said Burt, smacking his lips, or to be more precise, clacking them together. 'Tasty! Pukka!'

'I got nettles in my garter,' complained Bill, fumbling under his fine silks. 'Bloody forest.'

‘Hark at ’er,’ said Gerd. He affected an effeminate voice, or as close to one as his enormous stone vocal cords permitted him, to add: ‘*Got ne’els in my gar’er*’. Then he sniggered, a sound like a row of gravestones falling over domino fashion. ‘Ponce,’ he concluded.

‘Nance,’ snapped Bill.

‘Dunce,’ said Gerd.

‘Berk,’ said Bill.

‘Jerk,’ said Gerd.

‘Merck,’ said Bill.

‘Oi!’ said Burt. ‘Cut it out.’ Actually he said ‘Cu ih ah’, but the other two trolls understood what he meant well enough. They glowered at one another. Bill smoothed out the creases of his red silk skirt against his enormous thighs. Gerd looked haughtily away into the forest.

‘All we got to do now,’ said Old Gil, ‘is work out the best way to cook ’em.’

‘The best fmg with dwarfs,’ said Bill, ‘is to soffem ’em up, with a meat tenderiser, or a shovel maybe, and then chop ’em up.’

‘Nah, nah, nah!’ said Burt with scorn in his voice. ‘You dahn’t *cut* dwarfs, you *rip* ’em. And then you put ’em in a pot wiv onions, peppers, dozen cloves o’ garlic, some cardamom, *green* chillies not red ones, and a lemon. Forty-five minutes, take the pot off the ’eat, *then* add the basil, bay leaf, touch of mint, frow in four dozen carrots, put them on the ’eat again, only *don’t scorch* ’em, two hours, layer over with cream and brandy, Demerara, stir some more, ’nother lemon, fish

out their 'ats and boots (keeping 'em for stock) and serve the whole fing up with six hunnert-weight of spuds. Cushtie, that. Lovely. Pukka.'

'Or we could just sit on 'em,' said Bill.

'All right,' said Burt.

The trolls regarded the pile. 'Tell you what, Gerd,' said Bill. '*You* sit on 'em.'

'Me?' said Gerd, outraged. 'Why me?'

'You got the biggest bum.'

'Bugger *off* have I!' said Gerd, standing up in his fury. 'Gil's is twice my size.'

'Yer lie!' roared Old Gil, standing up also.

'Remember that leather skirt you bought in that Dongor boo-teak?' taunted Gerd. 'Oh we laughed at that, all right. Made your bum look like two cows fighting in a leather tent, that did.'

'Laugh at me behind my back!' Gil yelled, and put his fist into Gerd's face. The ground shook with the terrible force of the blow, but Gerd did not so much as flinch, nor did his expression change. He pushed out with his right arm, aiming a devastating hook and catching Gil, smack in *his* face. The blow made a noise like a thunderclap. Cups containing water that happened to be standing on the ground nearby jiggled little bullseye patterns of ripples in their surfaces. But Gil didn't flinch either. The huge trollp made no sound. To be honest with you, there's little point in trollps fighting, since it's almost impossible for them to injure one another and they don't really feel pain. But they sometimes go through the motions, just for the form of

it. After a few more punches on either side Gerd and Gil sat down.

‘Please kind sirs,’ squealed Bingo, who had been summoning his courage and trying to think of what to say. ‘Don’t eat us! We’ll give you gold!’

‘Gold,’ mused Burt. ‘I ate some of that once. A corn factor in Bardbury gave me a gold bracelet, had it engraved ’n all – “to my darlin’ in memory of the happiest weekend of my life, your snugly-puggly J. Harrow Whettlestone Jr, Corn Factor and Mercer, Seasonal Rates”.’ Burt sniffed as if moved by the memory. ‘I ate it, o’ course, but it did somefink shocking down below . . . you know what I mean.’

The other three trolls grumbled their agreement.

‘It ain’t specially digestible,’ said Bill. ‘Gold.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Gil. ‘Corn factor in Bardbury? You got a arrangement wiv a corn factor in Bardbury? What we doing skulking in these woods if you got a comfy berf in Bardbury?’

‘Well,’ said Burt shiftily. ‘Trufe is, he’s a special little feller of mine.’

‘Share and share alike,’ insisted Gil.

‘And I would,’ said Burt. ‘Only I et him last spring. He used to take me on special trips, it was lovely, the best hostels, fine clothes, as much dog as I could eat, but then one morning I woke up and looked at him and thought, “You’re a pretty tasty gent,” so I et him, and there it was.’

‘Enough natter,’ said Bill. ‘I’m going to squash me a dwarf. Better do somefing or we’ll be ere all night.’

He stood up and picked a wriggling dwarf from the pile. But whilst he was up, Gerd pulled another dwarf from the bottom of the pile, and quickly slipped it on to Bill's boulder. As the unwitting trollp sat down there was a sound of revolting flatulent squelchiness. He looked startled, and his three friends began their rolling, ponderous, stony laughs. 'Oho,' said Bill, with a stern face. 'Oh that's very funny, that is,' he said sarcastically. 'Oh, I'll split me sides laughing at that.'

'Should have seen your face, Bill,' said Burt.

'Ere,' said Bill. 'You 'av this one.' He tossed his dwarf to Gil, and got gingerly to his feet trying to unstick the object that was now adhering limply to his hindquarters. Meanwhile, the three other trollps took their own dwarfs, placed them carefully on whichever slab or boulder they were sitting on, and sat back down. The whoopee-cushion noises sounded wetly round the ring. For several minutes there were no further sounds in the clearing save the gnash and gulp of four trollps eating.

Things were looking grim for the company.

'This one,' said Gil shortly, 'tastes a bit of chicking.'

'Everyfing tastes of chicking to me,' said Bill.

'Cept gold,' he added.

'Are you supposed to take the shell off of 'em before you eat 'em?' asked Burt, picking a mangled chunk of chain mail out of his great teeth with a fingernail like a paving slab.

'You smell,' came a rather quavery but fairly deep voice, the sort of voice an adolescent boy might

inadvertently employ when he is on the cusp of slipping into manhood. 'You smell and, ah, nobody likes you.'

'Oo said that?' snapped Gerd.

'It was Bill,' said the quavery voice.

'No it wasn't,' said Bill.

'It came from over there,' said Gill, standing up and pointing towards the trees.

'No it didn't,' said the quavery voice. 'It was Bill. He said you all smell really unpleasantly and, uh, that you, oh I don't know, that you're a disgrace to the name of trollp.'

'Oo *is* that?' said Gerd.

The voice cleared its throat in a moist fashion, and seemed to slip down a semitone: 'Don't you speak to me like that, young Bill, you're the one who's a disgrace. I happen to know that the other two agree with me when I say that you've let down the honour of trollps everywhere.' There was a momentary pause. 'That was Gerd.'

Gerd was standing. 'I don't sound anyfink *like* that,' he declared, reasonably enough.

'No, no,' said the voice, 'that was definitely Gerd. I'd say that he's trying to pick a fight. Are you going to stand for that, Bill? Are you aHurgh Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh!' The voice was suddenly coughing so hard it was making the leaves nearby shudder. 'Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh!' it said.

Gil reached into the trees with his enormous hand, and brought out a wriggling figure dressed in a grey poncho and sporting a conical hat.

‘Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh! Hurgh!’ said the figure.

‘A wizard!’ said Gerd. ‘Now don’t that just cap everyfink?’

‘I’ve never et a wizard before,’ said Bill with glee in his voice.

‘He’s a bit scrawny, like,’ said Gil, examining him. ‘But ’e’ll do.’

‘Hurgh!’ said the figure, the coughing subsiding. ‘Hurgh!’

‘Gandef!’ squealed Bingo. ‘Save us.’

Gandef, suspended in midair by the stone grip of a trollp’s fist around his neck, managed to twist his head enough to look down upon Bingo. The look on his strained face seemed to say, *What do you think I’m trying to do, you twit?* It seemed to add, *And now look at the situation I’m in. What are we going to do now? It’s all very well for you, but I’m a man of advanced years, I can hardly tackle four fully grown adult trollps by myself, bearing in mind my chronic lumbar pain and everything, not that I’m one to complain, I’m only saying.* A twist of a wizardly eyebrow seemed to ask, *Can’t you reach one of the dwarf’s swords, cut your bonds, free the rest of Thorri’s company, dig a large pit, lure the trollps into it and quickly cover it with several hundred tons of earth?* As the despair on Bingo’s face implied a negative answer, the look concluded, *You’re a waste of space, useless, the lot of you.*

All in all, it was an exceptionally eloquent look.

‘Now,’ Gandef rasped, addressing the trollps. ‘Gentlemen. I advise you not to be hasty. I should warn you that I’m a wizard.’

‘So?’ said Old Gil.

‘Well, I could be trouble for you. In fact,’ he wheezed, trying to loosen Gil’s fingers with both his hands, and kicking his legs pitifully, ‘in fact – isn’t that the first ray of sunshine, dawn creeping up on you unawares, ha-ha?’

Burt looked over his shoulder. ‘So it is.’

There was a pause.

‘Well,’ said Gandef, his face growing increasingly purple and his voice increasingly gasping, ‘shouldn’t you make a dash for your trollp cave?’

‘Why would we want to do that?’

‘Well – you know. The dawn, the sunshine will, you know. Kill you.’

‘No it won’t,’ said Gerd. ‘Wot a odd notion.’

‘Oh,’ gasped Gandef. He seemed to be casting around for something else to say. ‘You sure?’

‘Quite sure,’ said Gerd.

‘I went on holiday to the Souflands last year,’ said Bill. ‘Lovely sunshine there. Got a nice tan. I say tan, it was more a sort of process of oxidisation.’

‘If you could just—’ Gandef hissed, the purple of his face deepening almost to black. ‘Be so kind as to – just put me down—’

‘Wot’s he saying?’ said Burt. ‘Put him down for a mo. Gil.’

The wizard dropped to the ground. For a while he lay panting, whilst the trolls discussed amongst themselves the best way of adding him to the meal.

'That's it,' said Gandef, pulling himself shakily to his feet. 'You've made me really quite tetchy now.'

The four trolls stopped talking, and looked down at the wizard.

'As a gentleman,' Gandef went on, 'I'm prepared to give you fair warning. Untie my companions here, apologise to them properly, and I'll let you be on your way. But I warn you, if you persist in this boorish behaviour, I won't be answerable for the consequences.'

'Wot consequences?' said Bill.

'Terrible consequences,' said Gandef, shaking his fist, or, possibly, simply holding his fist out such that it manifested his tremulous old-man wobble.

'Don't believe yer,' said Burt. 'Terrible conscience-quenches for *oo*? That's what I wants to know.'

'Terrible for *'im*, I'd say,' agreed Gerd.

'Shall I stamp on *'im* right away?' offered Gil.

'I *am* a wizard,' Gandef observed, with a tone in his voice that might have been hurt pride. 'After all.'

'And?'

'I'll put a spell on you. I've got some pretty uncomfortable spells, you know.'

'Har har har,' said Burt, speaking the laughter rather than laughing it in order to convey a sense of condescending and sarcastic dismissal.⁵

⁵ Why does this only work with laughter? If somebody tells you a bad joke and you say 'ha ha' you express a withering contempt for the feebleness of their sense of humour. But if they throw poor quality pepper in your face and you say 'sneeze sneeze' instead of actually sneezing, it doesn't have the same effect at all.

'I do so know some spells!' said Gandef. 'Terrible spells, some of them.'

'Bad, are they?' said Bill.

'Oo, yes,' said Gandef.

'What's your *worst* spell?' asked Bill.

'I could,' said Gandef, with dignity, 'turn you all to stone. Easily.'

'But we're already stone,' Gerd pointed out. 'Why should that frighten us?'

It seemed to Bingo that Gerd had a point. 'Hmm,' said Gandef, as if considering this.

'Turn us to stone!' said Burt. 'That's a good 'un!'

'Go on,' said Gil, 'do your worst.'

It wasn't easy to see in the dimness, for the shadows of the trees threw an obscurity over everything in spite of the growing light of dawn, but to Bingo's terrified eyes it seemed that the towering figure of the trollp froze for a moment, and then drained away to nothing. The other three turned to their comrade with puzzlement on their faces, and a moment later each of them also shrank away to nothing, losing the substantiality of stone and dribbling away downwards. They vanished completely. For a while the soddit could not believe his eyes.

Gandef settled himself on a boulder not stained with dwarf blood and lit his pipe, puffing meditatively for a while. Then, as if remembering something trivial that had slipped his mind, he got up, shuffled over to Bingo and undid his bindings. The two of them freed the remaining dwarfs, and in five minutes everybody

was huddled round the fire, rubbing their stiff limbs and eyeing the still-singeing dog carcasses with hungry, if disgusted, eyes.

‘Gandef?’ Bingo asked in a small voice. ‘You can hear me properly now?’

‘Oh yes,’ the wizard said, sucking on his pipe. ‘You all seemed to be in a sticky situation, so I ratcheted my hearing spell up a notch or two. I don’t like to leave it on all the time,’ he added. ‘It runs my magic strength down.’

‘What did you do,’ Bingo pressed, ‘to the trolls?’

‘Turned them to stone, just as I threatened.’

‘You turned them,’ said Mori, who was kicking his feet through the remnants of the creatures, ‘to sand.’

‘I didn’t say what *kind* of stone I was going to turn them into,’ said Gandef. ‘It only goes to show, never cheek a wizard. I’d suggest you scatter that sand through the forest in all directions. It’s still alive, you see, and it’d be better for us if we stop it from, well, *accumulating* again. Then we ought to be off.’