HEROIC ENDEAVOUR


In an earlier book, The Hobbit, Professor Tolkien portrayed a raw young world, where men crept up empty valleys while in the waste dragons and dwarves disputed hoarded treasure. In this world dwelt the hobbits, creatures very like men but with furry feet. They are jolly, rather Philistine, creatures whose chief pursuit is "growing food and eating it"; hearty beer-drinkers, heavy smokers, fond of giving parties and making after-dinner speeches. (One reader saw in them the influence of Toad of Toad Hall.)

In The Fellowship of the Ring it is as though these light programmes types had intruded into the domain of the Nibelungs. The result is a system of mythology as coherent, complete and detailed as that constructed by the ancients from the city-cults of the Levant. The author has undertaken a task at which Homer, Hesiod and Ovid laboured, and in this long book, the first volume of a trilogy, their different styles are mirrored by different moods.

The hobbits farm and feast and live for many years; but they are not immortal, and they marry and have offspring. The hero of this happy community of elderly schoolboys is Mr. Bilbo Baggins, who once captured a dragon’s hoard; he keeps a magic ring as trophy of this dangerous adventure. But the Shire, the placid home of the hobbits, is set in an ancient and ruinous world; the surrounding waste is dotted with the vestiges of vanished kingdoms, and by half-known roads uncanny wanderers bring rumors of unpleasant doings in the south. Mr. Baggins learns that his ring is more than a trophy. If the great magician can get hold of it, he will rule the world by its evil strength; but its magic is no help to the good, for the wearing of it is harmful to their souls and bodies. So Mr. Baggins retires to live in a wood with the elves, passing on the ring to his nephew and heir, Frodo Baggins. Frodo decides to destroy the ring; though it can only be melted in the fire that forged it, and this fire glows in the depths of the citadel of evil. He sets forth with his dangerous burden, is joined by various brave and gifted magicians, dwarves, elves and men, and by the end of the volume is about to enter, alone, the very capital of wickedness and danger. Duty has compelled him to undertake his task, and from a greedy young hobbledehobbit he has become a noble paladin.

Only considerable skill in narrative can surmount the difficulty of this complete change of key within the limits of one book. It is a near thing, but Professor Tolkien just pulls it off. The facetious account of banquets in the Shire leads on to gently beautiful descriptions of Rivendell and Lothlorien, the lush greenwood of the elves; later the grim record of the slaying of Balin, son of Fundin, the prince of the dwarfs who attempted to reconquer the underground realm of Moria from the sinister Orcs, echoes deliberately the matter-of-fact despair of the Sagas. The copious invention of background and the excitement of thrilling adventure carry the reader safely from mood to mood.

Yet the plot lacks balance. All right-thinking hobbits, dwarves, elves and men can combine against Sauron, Lord of Evil; but their only code is the warrior’s code of courage, and the author never explains what it is they consider the Good. Lacking the Grail, lacking romantic love, even the world of Malory would seem empty. Perhaps, after all, this is the point of a subtle allegory. Against Russia, the western world can draw together, but if the Iron Curtain vanished the rulers of Yugoslavia and Spain and Britain would find it hard to agree together on the next step. Whether this is its meaning, or whether it has no meaning, The Fellowship of the Ring is a book to be read for sound prose and rare imagination.
Heroic Endeavour.
Duggan, Alfred Leo.

**Category:** Book Review

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