THE EPIC OF WESTERNESSE


In this second volume of Professor Tolkien's mammoth trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, the action is little advanced. Frodo the Hobbit attempts to find a way into Mordor; on the last page he has penetrated the mountains, only to be captured by Orcs in the service of the Lord of Evil. But a long digression has described the fortunes of his earlier companions, in the great war in which the horsemen of Rohan overthrew the evil magician Saruman.

It is necessary to employ these unfamiliar names, for every reader must undertake the effort needed to grasp the unfamiliar world in which these events occur. The considerable effort is worth making. Now that all the complicated machinery has been made plain the narrative moves with tremendous verve. The whole work is a prose epic in praise of courage. Frodo, the unwarlike and comfort-loving Hobbit, learned that it was his duty to brave the Lord of Evil in his lair; his servant Sam puts the matter clearly:

I used to think that adventures were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them. I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't.

That is a point worth making, especially at the present day when so many arguments assume that, given the choice between death and slavery, the sensible man always chooses slavery.

Within his imagined world the author continually unveils fresh countries of the mind, convincingly imagined and delightful to dwell in. The principal discovery in this volume is the race of Ents. The Ents are tree-herds, and as shepherds grow to resemble sheep so Ents, who are eighteen feet high to begin with, grow to look very like trees. But they are a diminishing race. Once they had mates of their own species, but the Entwives took to gardening. When their gardens were ravaged by war they moved away; the Ents are looking for them, but they cannot find them. These splendid sylvan creatures might have been the theme of the book, but Professor Tolkien, prodigal of fancy, throws them in casually. They are part of the fauna of Westernesse, which presently comes to rank in the reader's imagination with Asgard and Camelot.

That is very high praise, which needs qualification. Large sectors of this mythic world are completely omitted: women play no part; no one does anything to get money; oddly enough, no one uses the sea, though that may come in the final volume. And though the allegory is now plainer there is still no explanation of wherein lies the wickedness of Sauron. Perhaps it is impossible to draw a convincing picture of strife between Good and Evil without a single mention of religion. But this is a tale to keep children from play and old men from the chimney-corner.
The Epic of Westernesse.
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