

# Merry in focus

## On Ring fever, having adventures, being overlooked, and not getting left behind

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To the casual reader of *The Lord of the Rings*, Meriadoc Brandybuck makes little impression as an individual. A lot of the time he forms one half of the 'younger hobbits' pair with Pippin; otherwise, apart from a brief moment of glory on the Pelennor Fields, he is just one of Frodo's friends – a handy person to have around if you want help throwing unwanted intruders out of Bag End after a party, or getting into the Old Forest, or putting things straight if you come home to find the Shire in a bit of a shambles. Even Tolkien himself sometimes seems to overlook this character, and he only tells the story from Merry's point of view when there are no other hobbits around to serve this purpose. Merry himself says less than any other hobbit in the book. But he has his own story, half hidden among its pages, and we can find it out if we trouble to look hard enough – a story which turns out in places to have echoes of Tolkien's own life.

### Ring fever

The first time we meet Merry, he is helping Frodo during the aftermath of the famous Party in S.R. 1401. According to the Brandybuck family tree (Appendix C of LOTR), he was born in 1382 so is now around 19 years old; hobbits, who mature slowly, don't come of age until they are 33, so in human terms he will be roughly equivalent to a 12- or 13-year-old. No more than a boy then, but already a capable, dependable boy – Frodo leaves him in sole charge for a while. (I wonder whether it was he who tipped Frodo off as to what Lobelia Sackville-Baggins was dropping into her umbrella. As he was to demonstrate several times during his career, Merry was rather good at keeping an eye on people without being noticed!) Presumably Frodo coached him to announce, rather precociously, "He is indisposed" (p38) when the Sackville-Bagginses arrived. But why was Merry at Bag End in the first place? Obviously, to help, and Frodo made good use of him. But as he explained to Frodo years later, in Book 1 Chapter 5, 'A Conspiracy Unmasked', there was more than just friendship to his contact with the Baggins family. The previous year, he had actually seen Bilbo put on the Ring and disappear – and ever since, he had been unable to get it out of his head.

To quote his own, tantalisingly brief account on p. 102, "I kept my eyes open ...I spied." We are given no details, apart from his 'one rapid glance' (p. 102-3) at Bilbo's account of his own adventures. But by the time Bilbo and Frodo celebrated their joint birthdays in September 1401, Merry would have known that Uncle Bilbo had a magic ring that could make him invisible – and would have been the only person in the pavilion (apart from Frodo) who knew exactly what had happened when his host suddenly departed in such a singular fashion. Doubtless he got away at the first opportunity to continue

*'He knows not to what end he rides; yet if he knew, he still would go on.'*

*Aragorn, of Merry, The Lord of the Rings, p. 762.*

'spying' at Bag End, probably following Gandalf up the Hill and eavesdropping on his conversations with Frodo and Bilbo, and certainly turning up the next day in order to find out more. If he hoped to see Frodo using the Ring he was disappointed. However, he will have had another chance to eavesdrop when, later on, Gandalf returned, and apparently did not notice that Merry was still there. Not for the first time in his life, Merry may well have

reflected that 'It's not always a misfortune being overlooked'! (p. 841).

Then Gandalf departed, Merry went home, and life continued apparently as normal – except that Merry continued to spy on Frodo and the Ring, on his own, without telling a soul, for seventeen years.

Merry was not a typical hobbit. He was one of the 'descendants of the Old Took ...who had as children been fond of Bilbo and often in and out of Bag End' (p. 41). (In Merry's case this was quite a long way to pop, Brandy Hall being over 40 miles from Bag End; doubtless the fact that Merry's family had cared for Frodo during much of his boyhood helped to encourage frequent visits by them while Merry was still too young to come on his own). He seems to have had even more Took in him than Pippin did; according to the Brandybuck family tree (Appendix C, p. 1076), both his mother and his paternal great-grandmother were Took. Perhaps this is why he thought little of the dangers of the Old Forest (a view he was later to revise) and 'loved the thought of [mountains] marching on the edge of stories brought from far away' (p. 774), and remarked to his frightened friends at Crickhollow, "I guess that you have been having adventures, which was not quite fair without me." (p. 100). But a Tookish longing for adventure does not alone explain his dogged pursuit of the Ring, throughout his tweens and well into adult life, with no idea what, if anything, it would ever lead to.

I think there were three reasons why he kept it up for so long. The first must have been concern for Frodo; it would be clear to Merry from his investigations that the Ring was not quite canny, and he was very fond of his friend. The second was undoubtedly sheer curiosity. He was always keen to learn about anything new to him, as he demonstrated, for instance, by asking Strider about the old road and trying to get Sam to continue the Gilgalad poem (p.181), or learning the geography of the south-lands while at Rivendell (p.448). But the third reason for his persistence, I am convinced, has to do with the nature of the Ring itself. Any contact with it could affect a person. "The very desire of it corrupts the heart," says Elrond (p. 261). Merry did not, it seems, consciously desire it for himself, and he certainly shows no sign of a corrupted heart. But he did see the Ring, probably more than once – Gandalf's admonition to Frodo, 'Do NOT use It again,' in his

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letter (p. 167), implies that previously Frodo had indeed used it, and Merry could well have seen him do so. His remark on Amon Hen, "He wouldn't keep it on ... when he had escaped the unwelcome visitor" (p. 395), suggests as much, though he covers himself by adding "like Bilbo used to." However that may be, the Ring was exerting its pull on him. The very fact of his pursuing it for so long indicates that, in the most nearly innocent way possible, he was hooked, and the most significant clue is his sudden cry in the midst of the discussion (p. 394), "It would be mad and cruel to let Frodo go to Mordor. Why can't we stop him?"

It is his only contribution to the discussion, and it makes no sense. He knew as well as anyone that the Ring had to be taken to Mordor for destruction, and that Frodo was the appointed bearer. (It is true that Pippin, in his own dismay, echoes "We must stop him", but Pippin often speaks without thinking, and in fact collects himself and goes on to say, "if we can't stop him, we shan't leave him".) Of course Merry is very concerned for Frodo – but so is Sam, probably even more than Merry, and he can still see that the task cannot be avoided. I feel that at this point, possibly without Merry's even being consciously aware of it, something inside him is crying out, "Don't do it! Don't let the Ring be destroyed!" If so, this is the last hint that Merry had a case of Ring fever, however mild. But perhaps it was just as well, for his sake and possibly Frodo's, that a distance of many miles was about to be put between him and that seductive gleam of remembered gold.

### Merry takes charge

"This Spring, when things got serious...we formed our conspiracy," Merry tells Frodo at Crickhollow (p. 103). 'When things got serious' cannot refer primarily to Gandalf's conversation with Frodo which forms the bulk of Book I Chapter 2; by then Sam was a full member of the investigating team and in place under the study window. Probably Merry is speaking of the ominous rumours from Outside noted earlier in that chapter (pp. 42-3), and also Frodo's increasing restlessness. Exactly how the 'conspiracy' was formed, and what careful sounding-out of his friends and relatives Merry had to do before settling on Sam, Pippin and Fatty as his partners in crime, is left to our imagination. One problem which may well have reared its head is that Pippin had not yet come of age. Unless we are to believe he simply vanished without a word to his family – something the sensible and caring Merry is not likely to have countenanced – it seems likely that some kind of guardianship arrangement was made. Hobbits were sticklers for correct legal procedure; witness the 'seven signatures of witnesses in red ink' on Bilbo's will (p. 38), and Sam's approval of the formal business between Faramir and Frodo (p. 675), which 'in the Shire would have required a great many more words and bows'. I reckon that Pippin was probably signed over, for the duration of the 'adventure', to the care of an adult hobbit – i.e. Merry, since Frodo, the nominal leader of the expedition, would not at this stage know of Pippin's involvement. Apparently it was not considered unusual for Took's to 'go and have adventures' occasionally; according to *The Hobbit* (p.14), 'they discreetly disappeared, and the family hushed it up.' I imagine that, in keeping with this tradition, Pippin's parents would be given the impression that he and Merry were doing no more than seeking a little travel and excitement. The direction of their journey and the name of Baggins would certainly not be mentioned – Merry did assure Frodo, at Crickhollow, that he could keep his

secrets, and he did not, at this stage, know for sure what form the 'adventure' would take.

Apart from the above speculations – nonetheless based on the known customs of hobbits – we have evidence from the narrative itself that, in addition to strong ties of kinship and affection with Pippin, Merry felt responsible for his young cousin. For instance, when separated from all his other friends and riding with Theoden's people, Merry thinks first of Pippin, and only belatedly (with a guilty start) of Frodo and Sam (p. 775), and later, even more tellingly, he pictures 'Poor Pippin, shut up in the great city of stone, lonely and afraid. Merry wished...he could blow a horn or something and go galloping to his rescue' (p. 813). And later still, 'he thought of Pippin and the flames in Minas Tirith and thrust down his own dread' (p. 815). So far all this may indicate nothing more than close and protective friendship, but in Moria there is a clue that Aragorn himself knew Merry had a special role where Pippin was concerned. After both of them try to push into the guard chamber, Aragorn specifically rebukes only Merry (p. 305), which seems to imply that he saw Merry as being responsible for taking care of Pippin and keeping him out of trouble.

What Merry said to his own family before setting off is unrecorded (given the amount of four-footed transport he was taking, he could well have passed the whole thing off as a pony-trading venture). What is certain is that, whether or not he was officially in charge of Pippin, he lost no time in taking charge of the entire expedition with impressive thoroughness. He had already helped Frodo to find, and move into, a suitable house in Buckland; he now shows himself to be a hobbit of very extensive resources, not only of courage and loyalty ("We are your friends, Frodo...We are horribly afraid – but we are coming with you" – p. 103), and efficiency ("we could get off in an hour. I have prepared practically everything" – p. 104), but also as regards finance. His father, the Master of Buckland, Saradoc 'Scattergold' (see Appendix C), must already have scattered a fair amount of gold in his only son's direction; Merry has provided "stores and tackle...and...perishable food" for four, plus a total of five ponies, out of his own pocket (p. 104 – the sixth pony mentioned must belong to Fatty Bolger, who had come from the Eastfarthing and would accompany them as far as the Hedge). Frodo, Pippin and Sam have nothing but what they have carried on their backs, and in Bree Frodo reflects that 'he had...only a little money with him' (p.160); goodness knows how far they would have got without Merry's careful planning.

There is some justification for a certain cocksureness in Merry's attitude as they set off into the Old Forest. Eighteen years' assiduous observation of the Ring and its owners, and several months' careful preparation, have finally paid off. However, one class of items is conspicuously absent from Merry's expedition kit. He has clearly not realised the implications of all those nasty rumours from the world beyond the Shire (and neither have the others), because the hobbits haven't a weapon between them.

For all the talk of 'Captain Frodo' (p. 103), it is Merry who personally takes the lead into the Old Forest. This is ostensibly because he knows the place, but it is clear from the way he organises everybody (including Frodo) at Crickhollow that he has effectively taken charge of the expedition, and feels more than competent to do so. We have already seen this side of his character at Bag End, but another factor that undoubtedly comes into play here is that Merry, as the heir of the

Brandybucks on his own side of the river, would socially outrank everyone else in the party. Pippin, though son of the Took and Thain, is off his home turf and still a juvenile; Frodo is a Baggins, respectable but not aristocratic; and Sam of course defers to everyone. Under these circumstances, and also as the expedition's chief financial backer, naturally Merry takes the lead. But as it turns out, he is no more able than the rest of them to resist the Forest's efforts to draw them into the Withywindle valley, and when real danger comes, he is, quite literally, caught napping. Demoted to rear-guard in the Barrow-downs fog, he fares no better, and needs rescuing once again. By the time Bree is reached, there is little left of the self-confident and organising Mr Brandybuck. Small wonder that when the others propose a visit to the common room, all he wants to do is "sit [in the parlour] quietly for a bit, and perhaps go out later for a sniff of the air" (p. 151). But he still grossly underestimates the danger – perhaps because of the homely atmosphere of the inn – and this leads to his next and nearly his most disastrous misadventure; he narrowly escapes being carried off by Black Riders. And as if to rub salt in the wound, the following morning he discovers that the whole of his splendid cavalcade of ponies has vanished.

Any naïve and inexperienced person can make a fool of himself. The question is, did Merry learn from his personal Valley of Humiliation? The answer is that he did. Nowhere, after Bree, could he possibly be described as foolhardy. The next time he enters a forest with a dangerous reputation – Fangorn – he does so with clear-headed caution, and although he knows the geography of the area and Pippin, his only companion, does not, there is no self-importance in his manner. But he does not over-react to his reverses by losing confidence altogether; far from it. On several occasions he shows that he can still, when appropriate, take a leading role,



but now with much more discernment and maturity. After Frodo is wounded on Weathertop, he again acts as senior hobbit, gravely informing Strider at one point that "We cannot go any further...I am afraid this has been too much for Frodo" (p. 198) a judgement with which Strider concurs, and on the following page we are told, 'Strider took Merry with him...to survey the country', as if he was his lieutenant or aide. Aragorn's response to his slip-up in Moria has already been mentioned; in fact Aragorn uses the occasion to drive home

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some good general advice – “Let the guide go first, while you still have one” (p. 305) – and it seems to me quite possible that Aragorn was seeing potential in Merry and, was actually training him (as he may have trained many a young Ranger), wanting him to be as well prepared as possible for whatever lay ahead.

As well as his natural qualities of leadership, commitment and teachability, Merry has another outstanding attribute – he is, as Gandalf says on the road from Isengard, “A most unquenchable hobbit” (p. 574). Nothing gets him down for long. Soon after his experience with the Black Riders, he is chuckling over the report of Frodo’s antics in the Common Room. His remarks about breakfast the following day are obviously meant as a crumb of comfort (p. 174) to the others, who are thoroughly dismayed by events, as well as to himself. He may miss Pippin’s ‘unquenchable cheerfulness’ (p. 762) at the Hornburg, but he has quite a fund of his own, as he showed particularly after his escape from the Uruk-hai. “I shall have to brush up my toes, if I am to get level with you,” he jokes to Pippin, under the eaves of Fangorn, battered, dispossessed, and with ‘little chance of ever finding friend or safety again’ (p. 448), and tells him, “You will get almost a chapter in old Bilbo’s book”. As the author comments ‘No listener would have guessed that [he and Pippin] had suffered cruelly’.

The true depths of his resilience, loyalty and courage were still to be tested, however, and for this Merry the cheery, affectionate and nobly born hobbit, with all his potential for leadership, would need to be transformed further, into Merry the warrior.

### Boromir

There may again be some speculation involved here, but I believe the roots of this transformation may go back to Rivendell and Merry’s and Pippin’s meeting up with Boromir. All we are told of their first impressions of him are that Pippin ‘had liked [him] from the first, admiring the great man’s lordly but kindly manner’ (p. 792) – a feeling that Merry presumably shared. But the Steward’s son of Gondor and the Thain’s and Master’s sons of the Shire could well have had a great deal in common. Differences of culture aside, they were from much the same social background – all three were heirs of local leaders, although admittedly leaders different in degree. Boromir was only four years older than Merry; the slowness of hobbits to mature would widen the gap somewhat, but Boromir and the hobbits were still basically in the same age group, in contrast to Aragorn, who was 87, and in even greater contrast to Gimli the long-lived Dwarf, Legolas the immortal Elf, and Gandalf, who as the Maia Olorin may have been present at the Creation. Another thing that Merry in particular seems to have had in common with Boromir was a fascination with the Ring itself, although neither of them had done more than glimpse it in Frodo’s or Bilbo’s hand. Almost certainly they would not be consciously aware of this in each other, but it could have strengthened the bond between them nonetheless.

After the Council of Elrond, when Aragorn and a good many of Elrond’s people were searching out the countryside, and Frodo and Bilbo, accompanied by Sam, spent at least some of their time putting their heads together over Bilbo’s book, Boromir and the two younger hobbits may well have been at a loose end, and naturally gravitated together. Boromir would probably have been a mine of stories about the wars of

Gondor, in which he had served with such distinction, and would doubtless have been interested in the hobbits’ ancient swords, which had come from the barrows of the lost North-kingdom whose princes were his distant kin. Aragorn may well have begun to show the swords’ new owners how to use them; I think it is highly likely that if so Boromir continued the process. Merry in particular, always eager to learn, would not pass up the chance of tuition in swordsmanship from a master of the craft, especially as he must now have been convinced of the real dangers of their undertaking and had no more intention than Pippin of being left behind (on this or any other occasion). Certainly by the time there is real fighting to be done, Merry and Pippin know how to handle their weapons, a skill they would definitely not have picked up in the Shire. Equally certainly, by the time the Fellowship leaves Lorien – so probably long before that in reality – Merry, Pippin and Boromir are a team. Galadriel acknowledges this when she gives them near-identical gifts; the two hobbits’ silver belts are miniatures of Boromir’s gold one. All the way down the Great River they share a boat. And on Amon Hen, as the Fellowship is scattered, Aragorn sees Merry and Pippin as Boromir’s responsibility – which coincides with the necessity of keeping Boromir away from Frodo – and sends him to find and protect them, which he does, sacrificing his own life in their defence.

### From Amon Hen to Bywater

If Boromir did play a part in teaching Merry and Pippin to use their swords, he would have the satisfaction of seeing that, in Merry’s case at least, it had paid off. According to Pippin’s recollection of events (at the beginning of Book 3 Chapter 3, ‘The Uruk-hai’), Boromir arrived at the scene of the hobbits’ attempted capture by a party of Orcs to discover Merry holding them off single-handed. The courageous and determined hobbit had already removed ‘several of their arms and hands’ (p. 434); no mean feat of strength and skill, although he had apparently not yet the ability – or perhaps the nerve – to get in under their guard for a killing blow.

Certainly Merry does not relish the thought of killing, or indeed of fighting at all. He is extremely nervous about going into battle, and very relieved when he finds that the horsemen approaching Theoden’s column near the Fords of Isen are Rangers of the North and not enemies. But even there, he was preparing himself ‘to die in the King’s defence’ (p. 757), not for glory but out of sheer loyalty towards his friends. Unlike Sam (in the Pass of Cirith Ungol, p.718), Merry does not even fleetingly dream of doing glorious deeds to be commemorated in song; it will be enough for him if he can escape disgrace, and “not have it said of [him] in song only that [he] was always left behind!” (p. 786). In fact his strongest motivation towards courage, in this or any other context, is simply love. At Crickhollow he tells Frodo, “You cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone . . . We are your friends” (p. 103). Even after his (fairly rapid) demotion from expedition leader he seems the sort of person who feels responsible for others; on p 552 he describes some Men of Isengard as being like “that Southerner at Bree”, whom he could not have seen unless he had put his head round the door of the common room to check up on his companions on his way out of the inn. His close, protective bond with Pippin (whether officially sanctioned or not) is obvious throughout the story, probably spurs him on to greater efforts against the orcs on Amon Hen, and, as mentioned above, helps him to keep up what courage he has left

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on the way to the beleaguered Minas Tirith. And his gratitude for Theoden's kindness to him at the Hornburg (the old king is apparently the only person in the entire party who has noticed that he is missing Pippin) prompts him to offer his service to him. Feeling completely useless, but 'filled suddenly with love for this old man' (p. 760), he pledges himself and his little sword, and Theoden, so recently bereaved of his own son, receives him gladly. (I wonder if it is possible that Theoden reminded Merry of another warm-hearted and redoubtable old aristocrat, who had died eleven years previously and was probably much missed – his own grandfather, 'Old Rory' Brandybuck. "As a [grand] father you shall be to me"...? Just a thought.)

Merry, esquire of Rohan, devoted to the King, just manages not to be left behind, thanks to the machinations of one 'Dernhelm'. (Did Aragorn really, with uncanny but not unprecedented foresight, order that Merry should be equipped for battle (p. 784)? Or was it Eowyn's idea all along? We'll never know.) Still feeling totally unheroic, he struggles with fear and despair all along the Southward road, until under the walls of Minas Tirith he faces the greatest test of his career – and at first, he fails. In vain he tries to rouse his courage: "King's man! ... You must stay by him" (p. 822). It is no use. Sick with horror, he cannot even raise his eyes to the dreadful presence before him – and small blame to him; very few could face the Witch-king revealed in his power. But then something happens that changes everything; he hears Eowyn declare herself, and 'the slow-kindled courage of his race' is roused at last (p. 823), roused, as so often in Merry, by love for someone else who needs him. And Merry, who has secretly spied on Bilbo and Frodo for eighteen years without being found out, uses his native hobbit stealth and experience in concealing himself to creep into position unnoticed, chooses his target, and strikes. Only once; but once is enough, and the Ringwraith falls, as Merry's final shout rouses the wounded Eowyn to deliver the *coup de grace*.

Then off the battlefield he stumbles into Pippin's arms, to receive peace and healing under Aragorn's hand. Briefly, in the Houses of Healing, we are given a vivid picture of him as he recovers. His grief (and other experiences) do indeed "teach him wisdom" as Aragorn says (p. 851). To be sure, he is the old "unquenchable" Merry still, waking up to announce, "I am hungry," and wanting his pipe (p. 851), but he has been deeply affected by all that he has seen, and almost embarrassed at being a hobbit, a member of a race who "use light words at such times and say less than they mean" (p.852). And after the great ones leave he is not quite so keen as Pippin to "be easy for a bit". He is glad to have glimpsed the "things deeper and higher"; he does not want to forget them. And his new maturity is evident in his actions during the rest of the story.

For a while after this, however, we lose sight of him almost completely. To his shame, he cannot march to the Black Gate with the host; like Tolkien himself, invalided out of the First World War with trench fever, he must remain behind in pain and weakness while others return to battle and danger of death. Shut up in the Houses of Healing, in a city torn between hope and despair, what did he make of the Eagle's tidings? He would gather that 'Strider' had survived, but there is no hint of any personal message for Merry about his friends, even

though one of them was the Ring-bearer himself. In the midst of all the rejoicing, there must have been one stunned little hobbit, relieved and glad that the Quest had succeeded, but steeling himself for the possibility that he was the only one of the original four to survive the War of the Ring. He was probably sure that Frodo and Sam, at least, were dead; the physical effects of the overthrow of Sauron were clearly seen (and felt) in Minas Tirith, and he knew nothing of Gandalf's rescue operation. He must have passed a couple of distressing days before the errand-riders arrived with more detailed news and he realised that his friends were still alive. (Tolkien was not so lucky. Of his boyhood group of friends the TCBS, the 'immortal four' (Garth, p. 177), only he and one other made it through the War.) Then Merry 'was summoned' (by Eomer, his own commander? Or Aragorn, as captain of the host?) and came to Ithilien – exactly when, we are not told. Nor do we know at what point he learned that Frodo and Sam had barely escaped with their lives – they may still have been in grave danger of death when he arrived – and that Pippin, who he had tried to protect and for whom he may have been officially responsible, was lying badly injured after being crushed by a falling Troll. All in all, the fortnight or so following the destruction of the Ring must have been rather harrowing for Merry. There was one crumb of comfort (as he himself might have put it); he and Pippin were no longer mere esquires, but had been promoted. As Pippin proudly announces to Frodo and Sam at Cormallen, they are 'knights of the city and of the Mark' (p. 934), doubtless as a reward for their deeds. And that gives us another clue as to Merry's life behind the scenes at this stage of the story.

We may have little actual information on Merry's doings between the Pelennor and the coronation, but as a knight of Rohan he will now have been officially part of Eomer's entourage in Ithilien (a rather select body – only 1000 of the Rohirrim had set out for the Black Gate, and some had been sent to Cair Andros and many more had fallen in battle, so probably only a few hundred now remained), and maybe he now acted as Eomer's esquire, having been Theoden's. Whatever his exact position, he must have had ample opportunity to observe at least some of the business of ordering the host 'and seeing to the mopping-up operations as 'some...laboured and fought much with the remnants of the Easterlings and Southrons, until all were subdued' (p. 936). Just as he had learned all he could about the South-lands while in Rivendell, so he might have taken advantage of this chance to absorb the principles of military strategy and tactics, and a few months later the knowledge was to come in very useful indeed.

The 'Scouring of the Shire' (Book 6 Chapter 8) is Merry's crowning achievement. As the travellers approach the borders, with Butterbur's hints about trouble on their minds, Merry remarks to Gandalf, "Well, we've got you with us...so things will soon be cleared up," and Gandalf tells him, "I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for." And trained Merry certainly has been, not just in wisdom and maturity but in the specific military and leadership skills which the situation demands. A little extra height and strength will come in handy too; as Gandalf once remarked, "The Ents pay attention to every detail!" (p. 574) – or rather, the unseen Providence

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does, the One who throughout the story ensures that those on the side of Right get what they really need!

Merry supports Frodo's leadership for a while, but it is increasingly Merry who acts and speaks. When Frodo fails to respond to his admonition, "You won't rescue Lotho, or the Shire, just by being shocked and sad, my dear Frodo" (p. 983), Merry takes up again the air of authority that he shed back in the Old Forest, and this time he knows exactly what he is doing. "Raise the Shire!" he declares, and a little later explains to Frodo, "I've got a plan," and Frodo, saying "Very good... You make the arrangements," places the whole affair in his hands (p. 987). In contrast to the ruffians, who had 'no leader among them who understood warfare' (p. 991), Merry makes his dispositions like a seasoned general.

Sam and Pippin carry the two surviving Barrow-blades, and Merry, who lost his to the Nazgûl-lord, will have been given a new one as a knight of Rohan. So the blades of Westeros and the Mark go to war in the Shire, and after all the separations and heartbreak of their adventures, it must have been deeply satisfying for Merry and Pippin to charge down to battle together at last, wielding their swords side by side, and win a great victory for their own people.

### Afterwards

With the Ring adventure finally over, Merry once again goes into the background of the main story, appearing simply as a 'lordly' figure riding by with Pippin, enjoying popular acclaim, and entertaining everyone with 'songs ...tales ...and ...wonderful parties' (p. 1002). In sharp contrast, 'Frodo dropped quietly out of all the doings of the Shire, and Sam was pained to notice how little honour he had in his own country.' (p. 2002). We are not told if Merry was unaware of this, or did he not care, but I cannot believe it of him. He had been keeping an eye on Frodo for at least half a lifetime and knew him extremely well. He could hardly have failed to notice how wounded he was in body, soul and spirit. The 'coming and going between Buckland and Bag End' (p.2002) must surely have included concerned observation of his condition. I think it quite likely that he saw Frodo's need for privacy and peace and deliberately encouraged the drawing of public attention towards himself and Pippin and away from his troubled and ailing friend. Certainly when the time comes for Frodo's departure, the bond between the four friends is clearly as strong as ever. Having arrived in a fearful hurry just in time to see Frodo before he leaves, Merry, it seems, is too upset even to speak, and all the way back to the borders of the Shire – at least a three days' journey, as the entire trip from the Grey Havens to Bag End takes seven days (p 1071) – he, Sam and Pippin ride without words, in the silence of heartfelt grief.

### Merry, his life, and his creator

Appendices B and C, and the later part of the Prologue, give us the rest of Merry's career, including his marriage to

Fredegar Bolger's sister Estella (Tolkien's fellow TCBSite, Rob Gilson, was unofficially engaged before his death to an Estelle King (Garth, p. 115)), and his becoming Master of Buckland. He seems to have travelled a good deal (p. 14-15), keeping up the links forged during his great adventure and also continuing to gratify that thirst for knowledge and learning that must once have helped to fuel his own quest for the Ring. His love and loyalty towards his friends in the South finally lead him in his old age to the deathbed of Eomer, his adopted lord, and to his own long rest among the great of Gondor in Minas Tirith.

Merry may, so to speak, have branched out a fair amount, but his roots were deep in the Shire, among the people and places he loved, as he indicated to Pippin in the Houses of Healing (p. 852). The desire that Galadriel divined in him was, he said, very similar to Sam's: to return in peace to home and garden (p. 348). (Was the part he did not wish to confess in Lorien perhaps a longing for Estella, as Tolkien on active service thought of his Edith?) He loved things that grow; for Merry, the scent of athelas was 'orchards, and...heather in the sunshine full of bees' (p. 851), and he wrote a whole book on 'The Herblore of the Shire' (p. 14), not all of which will have been devoted to his beloved pipeweed! He was thrilled by the sound of the tongue of Rohan, spoken and sung on the way to Dunharrow (p. 775) – another of his works explored the links between it and the old words of his own land (pp. 14-15) – and he assiduously collected and wrote up historical information – in fact he was a born scholar, with a tendency to give little lectures. We have one on the Old Forest (p. 108), one on Ents and Huorns, mixed in with his account of the storming of Isengard (p. 550-3), and the start of one on pipeweed (p. 544 – interrupted by Gandalf, and relegated to pp. 8-9 of the Prologue).

The comparisons between Merry and his creator are plain. Tolkien was a soldier who was invalided out of active service, having lost several people he dearly loved, and went on to settle down contentedly with his wife and family; he was a gifted scholar, lecturer and author, who loved plants, trees and unspoiled countryside, was fascinated by history (both real and imagined), and specialised in the study of languages; he was a devoted and loyal friend, to whom the companionship of like-minded people was very special; he was fond of good food, good pipe-tobacco, and the simple pleasures of life. He himself said (*Letters*, p. 232, footnote): 'As far as any character is "like me" it is Faramir' – the gentle soldier-scholar of Ithilien who shared Merry's exile from the battlefield in the Houses of Healing. But it seems to me that Merry has been overlooked again, and that in him we may well have (by chance or design) as good a portrait of the author himself as in any character he ever created. Perhaps this is not surprising. After all, Tolkien did say (*Letters*, p. 288), 'I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size).'

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### References

- N.B. All page references in the text are to *The Lord of the Rings* unless stated otherwise.
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