

It Bore Me Away: Tolkien as Horseman

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When I read *The Hobbit*, I quickly decided that J.R.R. Tolkien knew about, and liked, horses and ponies. This impression increased when I read *The Lord of the Rings*.

But why? In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien writes little about ponies, and names none. In *The Lord of the Rings*, horses are more individually important, though they only occupy a minority of the narrative. But Tolkien the storyteller paints in certain essential details and lets the reader's inner eye supply the rest.

The turning-point in my own introduction to Tolkien came when, in Chapter 4 of *The Hobbit*, we learn that the goblins will eat the ponies. Up to this point, the drama of *The Hobbit* is on a Tom-and-Jerry level; real peril is in the past or future. From this point on, we know that not everything flattened by a falling piano (or troll) will jump up again, and the stakes are raised.

In *The Hobbit*, the ponies (three lots) are a silent presence, sometimes starring in a little drama: frightened ponies, sudden bolts, riders and baggage in the river. But the details already seemed to me, early in my outdoor-riding life, central to the pony-and-rider experience. The shared knowledge that ponies can (and will) take fright at nothing, and will (and do) run happily into water before it dawns on them that it isn't much like grass, found its mark in my heart. The sound of bursting halter-ropes lay far in my future then, but later I came to believe that J.R.R. Tolkien had heard it.

Much of *The Hobbit* is homely in tone; ponies rather than war-horses bring it closer to a young, urban reader. In *The Lord of the Rings*, it is the hobbits that first convey the normality of horse-riding. They ride slowly, leading their ponies uphill like seasoned travellers. The affection between Bill and Sam is developed simply by Sam's attention to the pony and the pony's apparent contentment at his change of scenery. Bill's return to Bree is more horse-like

than romantic: Bree is in the lowlands, and Bill's old home, whereas Rivendell is in the moors, and Bill has only been there once.

Unlike *The Hobbit*, in *The Lord of the Rings* individual horses and ponies are nearly always personalised. Two – Shadowfax and Bill – have major parts. The author draws a quick, neat sketch of at least three others, Hasufel, Arod, and Fatty Lumpkin. Two “white chargers”, Asfaloth and Snowmane, are given action scenes rather than personal histories. Asfaloth is a storybook “good horse”, white, bright, and perfectly under its master's control. Snowmane's main role, in contrast, is to rear up in terror and fall on his rider, but he is named in many earlier scenes, so that we seem to know him by the time he gets his epitaph.

Asfaloth is a conventional fairy-story horse in his gem-studded headstall. Frodo's ride, on the other hand, is the most practical riding scene in the book. Glorfindel 'shortens the stirrups up to the saddle-skirts'. (This would seem to make Frodo perch like a jockey. This could be to help Asfaloth race the Black Riders. On the other hand, it would be most unsafe for a sick rider, and unnecessary for a horse used to greater weight. But if, as I believe, the term “skirt” was also applied to what is now called the “flap”, the description (and rider) slot neatly into place.)

Frodo is told to “sit as tight as you can”. Non-riders tend to say “hold tight”, but holding saddle, reins, or mane is insecure unless the rider can keep his legs against the horse. The author knows that Frodo will risk falling, despite the horse's care, if he does not sit firmly.

Crossing the ford, Frodo feels “... the quick heave and surge as the horse left the river and struggled up the stony path.” This is how a horse climbs: the front end goes first and seems to pull the back end up. This is much more clearly felt than seen.

At the top of the bank, the horse stops. Horses hate isolation, and he knows his

companions are behind him. Instead of fleeing, as we might expect, he swings round and calls out. A translation might run:

“This is me. Danger, trouble. Come here to me.”

Probably with a subtext of: “Get lost, you enemies.” This is what a horse does when separated from its companions by something threatening.

The horse rears up, which is odd, if Frodo is not to fall. The key here is in the detail: “reared and snorted.” What we are seeing, I think, is a half-lifting of his front end, and a cracking of nostrils – a normal gesture of defiance. The rider feels a lift and jolt, but is in no danger of being unseated.

Frodo sits tight until he loses consciousness. Then, despite Asfaloth’s intentions, he falls off. The whole sequence is strongly felt through the horse’s movements, and feels very much drawn from direct experience as well as observation.

The one area in which I doubt Tolkien is falling. He conveys no sense of hitting the ground from a moving or standing horse. Habitual riders learn to fall with minimum damage, but “Beren’s leap” in *The Silmarillion* is an extreme example. An unexpected rearing fall as described would run a real risk of killing Lúthien rather than saving her.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Shadowfax is the “dream horse”, as dreamed by every horse-smitten child, discussed, denied and dreamed again by ancient saddle-galled horsepeople who should know better. Typically an untamed stallion, he comes to his friend’s call, allows himself to be ridden without saddle or bridle, and understands what his friend says to him. Between the dream-horse and his rider there is always a special bond.

But if Shadowfax understands the speech of men, he wastes little time in conversation. He comes and goes. He gallops swiftly. Sometimes he whinnies. He does not carry messages, kill rattlesnakes, slide bolts with his teeth, or drag people out of fires. Shadowfax’s main role, with his great (but not extreme) speed and unusual stamina, is to carry his rider fast from point A to point B. His behaviour, as opposed to his intelligence, is that of a real, if exceptional, horse. Most remarkable is his stand before the

Lord of the Nazgûl:

Shadowfax alone ... endured the terror, unmoving, steadfast as a graven image in Rath Dínen.’

Col. Alois Podhajsky, then Director of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, tells in his book *My Horses, My Teachers* (Harrap, 1969) how in 1952 he and his Lipizzaner stallion were faced with a descending helicopter. Feeling the horse tense in terror – in front of 20,000 spectators – Podhajsky takes up the reins and closes his legs tightly, not to hang on, but to remind the horse of his presence and training.

It was a terrible moment. But Pluto Theodorosta remained motionless on the spot. This hot-tempered Lipizzaner stood like a monument, and only my legs pressed to his flanks felt him tremble.

The horse continued to stand still while the helicopter (a frightening object in any situation) landed nearby.

Tolkien invokes a horse’s powerful instinct to run from danger many times. No rider can be sure of holding a really frightened horse, but can only try to reassure the horse by quiet and firm handling. Shadowfax can make this choice rationally for himself, but his outward behaviour is real horse.

I turn now to the Rohirrim. The three hunters see “horses of great stature, strong and clean-limbed”. These are not Dark-Age horses, probably averaging under fourteen hands; ponies of that size do carry working men and full loads, but I think that “great stature” means just that. Hasufel easily carries Aragorn, who is also of great stature. These horses are not mediaeval destriers, either. Destriers are not built for speed over distance, whereas the horses of Rohan travel fast.

Horses like those Tolkien describes can still be seen, escorting HM the Queen along Victoria Street, Westminster, from the Station to the Palace. They belong to the mounted cavalry regiments, and are the type of horse that an officer would have ridden or seen during the 1914-18 war.

The Rohirrim, too, are drilled cavalry: “With astonishing speed and skill they checked their steeds, wheeled, and came charging round.” A great deal of experience is needed for a troop to do this, steering with the left hand and

to do this, steering with the left hand and carrying lances in the right. Few places other than cavalry riding schools would see such a manoeuvre in this century. I think Tolkien probably witnessed this, but I doubt he rode it. His open admiration for their skill is quite unlike his laconic description of Frodo's dramatic but more commonplace dash across the Ford at Bruinen.

I would guess that Tolkien never rode long and fast across country; or not in an unprepared state. The strain on even an experienced rider can be drastic, and doubly so without a saddle. Yet Gimli, that uneasy rider, rides with Legolas and Gandalf for the best part of two days, and can still stand (and sit) at the end of it.

Tolkien began to personalise horses late in his writing development. *The Silmarillion* treats horses incidentally; they carry riders and (just as crucially) deposit them. Three or four are named, but none has any personal narrative. An awareness of horse culture exists; grazing for herds; the mayhem caused by a group of horses bolting in terror (this may have been something Tolkien witnessed personally, as he uses it several times, from *The Silmarillion* to *Farmer Giles of Ham*); horses calling to one another from a distance (so Aredhel and Maeglin are betrayed). But real concern with the fate of the four-legged in Tolkien's earlier works is given only to Huan the Hound.

The shift from porter to personality seems to have come with *Farmer Giles of Ham*. The unnamed grey mare is no "dream-horse" but she is an "ideal" one; she knows what is going on, has her own opinions, and plays a crucial part in the story. As the lighthearted Hobbit opened the barriers to Tolkien's mythic world, so the comical Farmer Giles seems to have unbolted the stable door. The grey mare is Shadowfax's real ancestor.

Although the "dream horse" Shadowfax is the most important horse in any of the works, that Tolkien's imagination was moved first by mundane riding is, I think, shown by his change of heart (apparently prompted by Rhona Beare's

letter of October 1958, no. 211 in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*) about Asfaloth's harness.

"Chapter I 12 was written very early," he writes. "I had not considered the natural ways of elves with animals." I don't know by what route he came to this understanding; but it seems that his meeting with the dream horse came late in life, and not (as so often) in the first innocence of youth. This would make sense if he learned to ride as a young man, with little previous knowledge of horses. His attitude moved from affectionate but workaday to romantic and visionary as his writing developed. He never, however, became detached from his practical experience.

The conclusion I came to was that Tolkien had personal riding experience in a variety of conditions, but not the more extreme ones. He seemed to be strongly cavalry-oriented. His horsemanship is always aimed at getting somewhere, and he is very aware of the group and individual movement of horses. He knows the danger posed by a panicking mount, and the signs of fear in a frightened one. But Tolkien himself was not a cavalryman; and as far as I knew, his life showed no sign of leisure-riding.

When I asked Priscilla Tolkien about this at Oxonmoot 1990, she told me that her father loved horses, and that he had indeed learned to ride while he was in the army, not as a cavalryman, but as part of his basic officer training. He had had little opportunity to ride since then.

Unlike those who grow up with ponies, he would probably have had no experience of bareback or halter-riding outside school exercises.

The unhorsed could only hear of such things from messengers such as *Champion the Wonder Horse*, who was abroad in the late 1950's on BBC television (guided by a rope halter visible to the wary but quite invisible to a four-year-old). But whether it was Champ, or some other hero-horse that touched Tolkien's imagination between the grey mare and Shadowfax, I have no clues at all.