



**T**he Company of the Ring was a Company of Nine. Everyone knows that. Elrond himself defined the matter, shortly after the holding of the Council that bore his name. "The Company of the Ring," he declared, "shall be Nine; and the Nine Walkers shall be set against the Nine Riders that are evil." He must, presumably, have had some good reason to declare the Company a nonet. Admittedly there were nine Nazgûl - but they were not by any means alone in their evil. Possibly some form of learned numerology was involved. So the number nine went into the records, and passed gradually into legend. All this was despite the fact that the Company of the Ring actually numbered eleven.

It is, I think, worth having a quick look at the part played by the two supernumerary Companions of the Ring - glancing aside equally briefly at anything else noteworthy that is turned up in the process.

When the expedition set forth from Rivendell it already numbered ten rather than nine. One was a wizard, one an elf, one a dwarf - that made three. Two men made five. Four hobbits made the canonical nine. The tenth was Bill the pony.

Bill was with them all the way to the Gates of Moria. His usual job was simply to carry baggage - but during the retreat from the bad weather that the party encountered in the Redhorn pass, he gave Gimli a short ride. The occasion must have been vivid in Gimli's mind when later he was expected to ride one of the steeds of Rohan, though the book makes no further mention of the incident. As far as being an escort for the Ring went, Bill's work was finished when he had to be left behind outside Moria, though he managed to make his way back to Bree (which in itself is slightly odd: I would have expected him rather to seek Rivendell), and there rejoined the returning hobbits on their way home to scour the Shire.

When Moria's gate clanged shut, the Company was at last reduced to its nominal establishment of Nine. Or was it? If it was, then it very soon reverted to ten, the tenth - or eleventh - being of course Smeagol, alias Gollum. Now Gollum was of much more importance than Bill - after all, he was not only the last of the Ring-bearers, but the one who (apart from Sauron himself) bore it longest. It is therefore worth examining his comings and goings in somewhat more detail.

At the Council of Elrond it was revealed that Gollum had escaped from captivity and was at liberty, precise whereabouts unknown. It is uncertain

precisely when he became an unofficial member of the Company. Frodo first noticed him - or the footsteps and staring eyes that were pretty certainly his - during the early part of the journey through Moria. Aragorn later confirmed that he too had noticed the signs then, and Frodo supposed Gollum to have been simply lurking in Moria when the Company happened along. He may well have picked up the Company's trail somewhere in the wilderness between Rivendell and Moria, however, if not that of the somewhat more limited Company before it even reached Rivendell. So for a time the Company *may* have numbered a full eleven.

Gollum was seen in Lórien by both Frodo and at least one elf - who, uncharacteristically, was either unable or unwilling to do anything about him at the time. He followed the Company's convoy down the Anduin lying on a log and paddling with his hands. He went missing for a while when the Company dispersed at the Falls of Rauros, but he soon got back on the trail of Frodo and the Ring. When he came too close and was caught, Frodo promptly spared his life. This point should be particularly noted, because it is of major importance in the further development of events.

From his capture until the party reached Cirith Ungol, Gollum ranked as a full member of the depleted Company. The book in fact refers in one place to Frodo, Sam and Gollum as "the three companions". This companionship was interrupted briefly when Faramir's company put in an appearance and secured the persons of Frodo and Sam before that of Gollum - but again Frodo was instrumental in preserving Gollum's life, and the trio soon continued south as a trio.

The events at Cirith Ungol finally disrupted any remaining companionableness between Gollum on the one hand and Frodo and Sam on the other - but Gollum did not go away, he simply stuck as close to the other two as he could without actually being any longer of their party. And once the party reached Mount Doom, there could be no holding him even at arm's length any more. At the long-awaited climax Frodo at last reached the Crack of Doom with the Ring - but then, with victory literally only a gravity-drop away, the Ring proved too strong for him. He was both mentally and physically incapable of giving it up, let alone of destroying it. So was he, under its baleful influence, to pass it unwittingly or unwillingly back to Sauron after all? As we know, he did not. It was a near thing. This, however, was where Gollum came (in more senses than one) into his own. This was his supreme moment. On the edge of the chasm he grappled with the Ring-bound Frodo, bit off the latter's finger, and so regained his Precious. Capering in insane triumph, he lost his footing and over he went, Ring and all. The Quest had succeeded.

In a sense, Gollum was the one who succeeded where Frodo failed. Such was never, most certainly, his intention. Yet that is in fact what did happen - in, as I said, a sense. In another sense, however, the triumph was entirely Frodo's. Gollum was only able to perform his dramatically vital act because he was there. And he was only there because Frodo, amongst others, had repeatedly spared his life. Since Gollum's life was entirely wrapped up in the Ring, he would never willingly have been far from it. Hindsight says that by sparing Gollum's life, Frodo had ensured that Gollum would be there at the finish to do his stuff. As he was, and as he did.

Bill the pony, then, was openly recognised as a tenth member of the Company of Nine. Gollum, although not a recognised Companion at the start, became so before the finish, certainly from Moria, and possibly before that.

Has anybody ever wondered why eleven is such a popular number in team-sports?

**Archie Mercer**