

“The House of his Spirit Crumbles.” A medical consideration of Faramir’s condition on his return from the retreat from Osgiliath, in *The Lord of the Rings*.

DR JENNIFER URQUART

In *The Return of the King*, Faramir, Captain of Gondor and only surviving son of the Steward, is seriously injured while attempting to defend his city, Minas Tirith, from attack by the forces of Mordor.

“... in his arms, before him on his horse ... [Prince Imrahil] ... bore the body of his kinsman, Faramir ... found upon the stricken field.”¹

The reader of *The Return of the King* can glean information about several problems. Faramir is unconscious. He has received an arrow-wound, albeit a fairly minor one, and by twelve hours afterwards at the very latest, he has a very high body temperature, described as a fever, which seems not to abate at any time until Faramir is cured. Since he is so ill it is assumed that the arrow that hit him was a poisoned arrow from the Nazgûl and, therefore, that the wound is mortal. There are no signs that he initially receives any medical care beyond the extraction of the arrow and staunching of the wound by Prince Imrahil, and basic care for Faramir’s comfort such as bed and extra blankets when he is moved outside. About thirty-six hours after Faramir is brought home, his father Denethor attempts to kill him, convinced that defeat and death are inevitable, and then commits suicide by fire. Faramir is covered in oil, although not burned or further injured, and is taken to the Houses of Healing. His condition, however, continues to worsen and by the time the returning king, Aragorn, sees him, he still has a very high temperature, is unresponsive and is close to death. It is noted that his brow is “drenched with sweat.”²

Diagnosis is wrong?

Aragorn examines Faramir, and suggests that the diagnoses are wrong. The wound was not from an arrow of the Nazgûl, since in that case Faramir would have died much sooner; furthermore the wound was not poisoned or infected as it is healing well, despite the overall worsening of his condition. Aragorn suggests that Faramir’s primary problem is the ‘Black Breath’, but that he is also suffering from exhaustion, “grief at his father’s mood”² and a minor physical wound. Aragorn then saves Faramir’s life by entering some sort of trance, expending much strength of his own in doing so, to bring Faramir’s spirit back to his body. He subsequently wakes Faramir by causing him to inhale the steam from an infusion of the herb *athelas*, and Faramir is set on the road to recovery. He is completely recovered

about two weeks later, and is able to take up the duties of ruling steward.

However, the details of Faramir’s condition are not immediately apparent, and I have wondered about them. In particular, I have wondered why Faramir had a fever. Several characters were wounded in the battles against Mordor and, like him, suffered severely from the Black Breath. All the others, however, followed the normal course for those who have the Black Breath: progressive loss of consciousness and hypothermia, leading to death unless cured. He, however, had a high and persistent fever from early in the course of his illness. The obvious cause is an infection (or poison) in his wound, but we are told that his wound is clean and healing well even as he becomes increasingly ill. Why, therefore, does he have a fever?

Presented here are the conclusions of those musings.

Some of Faramir’s problems fit easily into a modern medical paradigm; others do not. His arrow-wound is “not deep or vital”² and, if not poisoned, is thought by Prince Imrahil to be insufficient explanation for his desperate illness. Extreme exhaustion can kill; and “grief” (when called ‘stress’) is widely recognised by modern medicine to worsen many illnesses, even if exactly how it does so is not always well understood. The ‘Black Breath’, however, does not fit easily into a modern medical understanding of illness, in the same way that it did not really fit into the conventional Gondorian understanding either:

“Now all their art and knowledge were baffled; ... And those who were stricken with it fell slowly into an ever deeper dream, and then passed to silence and a deadly cold, and so died.”²

Black Breath

The Black Breath, which is contracted by coming into excessive proximity to the Nazgûl, appears to be primarily a spiritual malady, with additional psychological and physical symptoms and signs including fear, confusion, reduced levels of consciousness, hypothermia, weakness and death. However, Faramir’s illness does not appear to follow this well-described course. Aragorn does not directly explain Faramir’s fever, and it is not typical for the ailments from which he is suffering.

Faramir received his arrow-wound “... as he held at bay a mounted champion of Harad ...”¹ only a few minutes before he is brought home at the end of a losing battle with which he has been engaged for the previous two days, culminating

in a retreat, lasting perhaps fourteen hours, of some twenty miles, during which time he has been fighting in the rearguard. Taking personal command of the rearguard, he is exposing himself to great personal danger, strenuous exertion over an extended time and considerable mental strain. By the time he is wounded, Faramir has probably been fighting for two days, in very humid weather, with very little rest. His enemies have fought night and day, judging by the signs of battle visible from Minas Tirith and the messengers that Faramir sends back at regular intervals to the city. He is also likely to have had little to eat or drink, possibly nothing at all since the start of the final rapid retreat which probably began in the early morning of the day he was wounded in the early evening.

Presumably he is wearing armour, although this is not described. Since he is the heir to the stewardship, and probably at this point Gondor's senior battlefield commander, it seems reasonable to conclude that he is wearing the best armour available. It is not clear what sort of armour this might be, since other than the heirloom helmets of mithril and the mail worn by the citadel guard, the only specific details given about Gondorian armour are that Denethor wears mail (although mostly to prevent a decline in his physical fitness) and that Prince Imrahil has vambraces and mail. Given that Gondor seems to be a fairly sophisticated ancient society, geared towards war for many centuries, my opinion is that for an engagement of this kind, Faramir would probably have had at least some plate armour, which gives better protection than mail, possibly over a coat of mail, with the necessary thick padding underneath.

Faramir was not well-rested when he set out to battle. He had returned the previous day from a ten-day mission in Ithilien on the borders of enemy lands, so weary that he was unsteady on his feet. With only one night's sleep and an early rise the following morning, he had to leave for battle again, on an expedition which he thought ill-advised from a military point of view since "... [the enemy] can afford to lose a host better than we to lose a company."¹

Many Stresses

Faramir is described by Aragorn as being psychologically strong, "... a man of staunch will ..."² and, as a fairly pure Númenórean, a man of considerable mental powers. However, at this point Faramir is afflicted by many sources of distress.

Firstly, he is suffering greatly from grief for his brother Boromir who had been killed a fortnight earlier. Faramir loved Boromir dearly, and his grief was compounded by the recently acquired knowledge that Boromir had fallen prey to the evil influence of the Ring and had acted very dishonourably shortly before his death.

Also, Faramir, during his recent mission to Ithilien, had met Frodo who was travelling into Mordor to destroy the Ring which was the key to Sauron's power. He had permitted Frodo to continue his journey, since he could see no better alternative, but expected Frodo, whom he regarded as a friend, to be captured and put "to death or to torment"³ He

was aware that the failure of Frodo's mission, which Faramir expected, would mean that the Ring would be re-captured by the enemy; this would be followed by the swift defeat of his city, the destruction of his nation and his own and his father's death or capture and torment.

In addition, on his return from Ithilien, the night before he left for battle again, Denethor became very angry with him, accused him of treason for failing to bring the ring to Minas Tirith, and compared him unfavourably with his dead brother. Finally, his father said he wished that Faramir had exchanged places with his brother, which Faramir may have taken to mean that his father wished that it had been Faramir who had died. The next morning, immediately before Faramir was sent out, there was further contention during the council meeting. Denethor cast aspersions on Faramir's courage in front of the council and the assembled commanders, and rebuffed his attempt to make peace between them and his explicit request for his father's love. Faramir was then denied the thanks and blessing that his father later said he should have received before leaving. "... I sent my son forth, unthanked, unblest, out into needless peril, and here he lies with poison in his veins."¹

Furthermore, according to Aragorn in the Houses of Healing, Faramir had not completely recovered from the Nazgûl's first attack on him, which took place when he was returning to the city from Ithilien. "... already he had come close under the Shadow before ever he rode to battle on the out-walls. Slowly the dark must have crept on him even as he fought and strove to hold his outpost."²

As the retreat approached Minas Tirith, the Nazgûl attacked. If the commander could be incapacitated then the rest of the retreating men would be relatively easy to destroy, which would undermine the morale of the defenders, who were watching from the walls of Minas Tirith. While the Nazgûl might not have been able to recognise Faramir personally, they might have been able to deduce his likely identity. This would give them additional cause to target him, since the loss of Faramir could be expected to do particularly severe damage to the city's morale as well as to his father's strength, and would deprive Gondor of an extremely capable commander. It seems reasonable to suggest that Faramir would, therefore, have suffered particularly sustained and concentrated assault.

None of the abovementioned is, however, a reason for a fever. In my opinion, this also may be a misdiagnosis. Clearly Faramir is very hot and very ill, but it is possible that what is perceived as a fever is in fact heatstroke. Even in modern medical practice the initial clinical differentiation of the two conditions depends to a considerable extent on the history of the illness. In Faramir's case I think confusion could arise fairly easily. Heatstroke is rare in otherwise healthy adults except in the case of those who undertake prolonged strenuous exertion, typically military personnel or athletes, especially those who are wearing protective equipment which prevents the evaporation of sweat – the primary mechanism for the loss of heat from the body. Heatstroke is worsened by dehydration, which if severe will



prevent further sweating, leading to an even greater increase in body temperature, and is more common under conditions of high atmospheric humidity.

Dehydration

In my opinion, a likely scenario is as follows: Faramir, as he approaches Minas Tirith, is exhausted, and has had little or nothing to eat or drink for some time. He is somewhat dehydrated, and suffering from early heatstroke due to being unable to lose heat through the evaporation of sweat because of his armour and the very humid weather. He would be feeling very hot, light-headed and weak, and

possibly starting to have difficulty thinking clearly, but forcing himself to continue with the same strong will with which “he can master both beasts and men.”¹ As the mounted sortie leaves Minas Tirith to cover the retreat, Faramir is assailed by the Nazgûl, who at the very least will be a further impediment to concentration and make it more difficult for him to give attention to his surroundings. At that moment he is struck by an arrow and falls from his horse, either due to pain from the wound, or from being physically knocked out of the saddle by the force of the arrow’s impact. He loses consciousness from the Black Breath⁴ or possibly from exhaustion and heatstroke. Faramir is then found by Prince

Imrahil, unconscious and very hot, but apparently with only minor injuries. Since fever is generally more common than heatstroke, and sometimes a sign of poisoning, Imrahil's assumption that the arrow that hit Faramir was poisoned is reasonable; especially since Faramir is now unable to say that he feels very hot, rather than feeling cold as those suffering from a constant high fever tend to do. Since he may have stopped sweating due to dehydration, he may have appeared more like someone fevered than someone too hot.

Faramir is then brought to the citadel, and put in bed. The traditional English treatment for any illness classed as 'a fever' was to keep the patient very warm with clothes and many blankets, until the fever 'broke', that is, the patient started to sweat, which, after a constant fever, was taken as a sign of the start of recovery. There may have been some merit in this treatment, because when an illness is caused by infection, fever may aid recovery, to a degree which might make a difference significant in the absence of antibiotics.⁵ Such treatment may also provide comfort, since those with a fever tend to seek warmth as they are trying to maintain a body temperature higher than normal. Circumstantial evidence of this approach in Gondor is provided by the fact that when Faramir was taken outside at night, he was covered with additional "warm coverlets"¹ in an attempt to ensure his comfort.

In Faramir's case, however, blankets would have made the situation worse as it would have further impeded his ability to lose heat, leading to a possible further rise in his temperature, and worsening of his condition. As he was thought to be mortally wounded, the first consideration seems to have been for his comfort, leading to him being disturbed as little as possible. Denethor could have bathed his face or tried to give him a little water, both of which might have helped, but there is no record in the text that this actually happened.

When he was rescued by Gandalf after his father attempted to take his life, Faramir was moved rather roughly and he "... moaned and called on his father ...",⁶ possibly in pain, suggesting that at that point Faramir was not completely unrousable. Unfortunately he had also been drenched in oil, which would further impede his ability to lose heat.

Faramir was then taken to the Houses of Healing, the main hospital in Minas Tirith, which was extremely busy treating the many casualties of the battle. He already had a fixed diagnosis of fever due to a poisoned arrow-wound, which may have seemed plausible and not been questioned, leading to further attempts to ensure that he was kept warm enough to aid his recovery from what was perceived to be a poison-induced fever. But the healers will at least have tried to cure him, since they were trying to save Faramir's life rather than merely mourning his apparently inevitable death. To that end, they may have made great efforts to get Faramir to take something to drink while he could, which would be helpful in the case of fever, or any wound leading to blood loss and also, incidentally, in heatstroke. If not awake enough to drink normally he might, when very dehydrated, have sucked fluid from a sponge or a cloth, and

fluid could also have been given by other means. Once he was a little less dehydrated, Faramir would have started to sweat profusely. They may also have changed his clothes. It seems unlikely, however, that he would have been bathed and scrubbed vigorously all over with soap. This would have been necessary to remove all the oil and permit him to lose heat effectively through sweating, but might have been seen as unnecessarily distressing for a man who was very ill and for whom movement caused pain. Working against the possible slight improvement in his heatstroke would have been the gradual progression of the Black Breath as time passed and which would, without Aragorn's treatment, have killed him. The Black Breath would have led to deeper unconsciousness, preventing further administration of fluid by mouth.

Therefore, when Aragorn arrived, he found Faramir still very hot, but with his brow drenched with sweat, and near death from the effect of the Black Breath on a man battered down by physical exhaustion, psychological distress, and pain. Aragorn, who as the rightful king was the only one able to cure the Black Breath, did so, and over the following days Faramir recovered from his other ailments. It was fortunate the king did return, just in time to save the life of the man who would be his steward for many years thereafter.

It is left to the reader to judge whether the theories presented here are correct.

1. *The Siege of Gondor*, Ch. 4, Book Five, *The Return of the King*, J. R. R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955.
2. *The Houses of Healing*, Ch. 8, Book Five, *The Return of the King*, J. R. R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955.
3. *The Forbidden Pool*, Ch. 6, Book Four, *The Two Towers*, J. R. R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954.
4. *Strider*, Ch. 10, Book One, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, J. R. R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954. Merry, a hobbit, suffering briefly from the Black Breath at Bree, was rendered unconscious immediately by going too close to one of the Nazgûl.
5. *The Houses of Healing*, Ch. 8, Book Five, *The Return of the King*, J. R. R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955. Although since "the leechcraft of Gondor was ... wise, and skilled in the healing of ... all such sickness as east of the Sea mortal men were subject to. Save old age only." Tolkien implies that Gondor has effective treatment for infectious disease, a scourge in societies that do not have antibiotics.
6. *The Pyre of Denethor*, Ch. 7, Book Five, *The Return of the King*, J. R. R. Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955.

Dr Jennifer Urquart is a medical doctor who is currently at home looking after her four children to whom, to their great delight, she has just read *The Lord of the Rings*.