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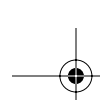
## SIMPLICITY



**H**OBBITS ARE A RUSTIC PEOPLE, with little use for machinery and little concern for the affairs of the larger world. They are fond of eating (plenty and often), and they prize predictability over originality. They despise adventures of any kind, considering them (rightly), ‘nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things. Make you late for dinner!’” (*The Hobbit*, p. 18). Hobbits are unlikely heroes.

Nevertheless, no less august a person than Gandalf the Grey, a wizard of some renown, chose a hobbit, Mr. Bilbo Baggins, as chief burglar for a group of Dwarves seeking to reclaim their ancestral home from a fearsome dragon. His choice seemed the height of foolishness to the Dwarves, but in the end they discovered that cleverness, resourcefulness and leadership may sometimes be found in the most unlikely places, and indeed they





almost surely would not have succeeded in the adventure without their burglar's assistance.

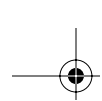
Gandalf apparently had some inkling of Bilbo's potential, but he probably had no idea of the consequences of his choice. That Bilbo would find the One Ring, lost for generations, that he would play a part in the greatest conflict of the Third Age of Middle-earth, was surely beyond the wildest dreams of any of the wise, and it did not come into any of the old prophecies. What seemed little more than a mad whim, an amusing footnote in the annals of history, became the seed of something that would shake the tower of Barad-dûr, ancient fortress of the Dark Lord Sauron.

Nothing in the long, uneventful history of the Shire suggested that its inhabitants might be capable of wielding such power. Centuries of peace had made Hobbits soft. Yet they had not lost the strength with which they were created. "There is a seed of courage hidden (often deeply, it is true) in the heart of the fattest and most timid hobbit, waiting for some final and desperate danger to make it grow" (I:178).

It is the nature of seeds to lie dormant as long as necessary. And once they have sprouted, they need time and careful tending in order to grow. Simple people can be maddeningly shortsighted and provincial, but the cost of gaining wisdom and perspective is often calamity. As Frodo says, contemplating his departure:

I should like to save the Shire, if I could—though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too dull and stupid for words, and have felt that an earthquake or an invasion of



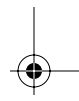


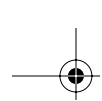
dragons might be good for them. But I don't feel like that now. I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again. (I:88-89)

An example of Hobbits' maddening simplicity comes in the Birthday Party that opens the tale. All the Bracegirdles, Hornblowers, Proudfoots and other clans gather, not so much to honor Bilbo as to take advantage of the opportunity of feasting for free, enjoying spectacular fireworks and enduring the inevitable Speech. They do not understand, nor do they care to learn, the part that Bilbo played in defeating a dragon or in bringing about peace between Dwarves, Wood-elves and the Men of the Lake. Few in the Shire even believe his tales; they think him eccentric at best and completely cracked at worst. It is hard to be patient with such folk.

Strength is not created by adversity; it is merely awakened by it. The hobbits are defended on many fronts by more sophisticated people who do not believe that simplicity is a sign of weakness. As Aragorn says at Elrond's Council, "If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be" (I:299). But this protection does not diminish the possibility that the most heroic deeds may be accomplished, or at least attempted, by the very same simple folk that are thus sheltered.

Before all is said and done, the hobbits shall have their calamity, and all of them will have the chance to learn of what stuff they are made, for wisdom and perspective are more important than safety. But that comes later. In the meantime they have to





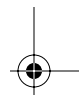
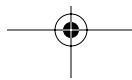
be protected from “foes that would freeze their hearts” (I:299) long enough to confront a more Hobbit-sized disaster. It is to be hoped that even after their day of reckoning they will continue to be a simple people, only wiser and more compassionate. Indeed, throughout the adventures of the three hobbits who accompany Frodo, they call upon their plain Hobbit-sense in their darkest moments and find that it sustains them.

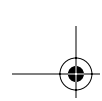
On the other hand, there is often more to the simplest of our friends than it appears. Even Frodo is surprised by Sam’s pensive and poetic response to the Elves they meet as they are leaving Hobbiton.

“They are quite different from what I expected—so old and young, and so gay and sad, as it were.” Frodo looked at Sam rather startled, half expecting to see some outward sign of the odd change that seemed to have come over him. It did not sound like the voice of the old Sam Gamgee that he thought he knew, but it looked like the old Sam Gamgee sitting there, except that his face was unusually thoughtful. (I:117-18)

It is all too easy to fall into patterns of relationship wherein all responses are predictable because we ourselves are saying nothing new. It often requires seeing friends in different contexts, in the company of strangers, to open our eyes to the unsuspected depths of their character.

If simplicity is a virtue, then living simple lives and cherishing simple pleasures are all that is required for our lives to have value. We need not feel guilty when we suspect we should be doing more for God’s kingdom, for when he needs us he will call us, and until then we can be content to husband our strength,





put down roots and enjoy the good things that have been given us. This is not to say that we shouldn't seek to improve ourselves or minister to those around us, only that limiting our efforts to our immediate family and neighbors is sufficient until our calling has been revealed.

When God does call us, it may be to a journey of danger and terror, with the possibility of no return, or it may be to the simpler danger and terror of confronting a boss whose practices seem a little shaky. The most simple among us are not safe from these possibilities. On the other hand, it may be that our calling is simply to live well in the midst of the community we were born in. This is not to be despised. The tale of Frodo and his friends may give us hope that we will be given the strength and the help we need to accomplish whatever task is set before us.

