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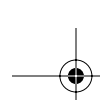
FRIENDSHIP



THERE IS NO GREATER TREASURE in Middle-earth (or anywhere else for that matter) than friends. For all the benefits of being unencumbered, Frodo is fortunate to find he has several such treasures and that three of them refuse to be left behind.

Merry, Pippin and Sam are not perfect friends. They poke their noses into Frodo's personal affairs; they spy on him, scheme behind his back and entirely fail to abide by his wishes. "My dear old hobbit, you don't allow for the inquisitiveness of friends," says Merry (I:137) when their conspiracy is unmasked. To Frodo's amazement, they know all about his decision to leave the Shire and even about the Ring. They are, however, resolved to guard his secrets more closely than he has himself. They are better than perfect; they are true.



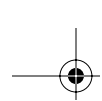


Friendship alone has little strength to overcome evil. The four hobbits are easily lulled by Old Man Willow and later again by the Barrow Wight. They remain hidden from the Black Riders mainly by luck, and without the intervention of Tom Bombadil and the Elves they might never have made it to Bree. Throughout the adventure the main benefit of their friendship is simply that they get to enjoy each other's company, to laugh and sing together, and to comfort and encourage each other. They cannot fight Black Riders, they have less knowledge of the lands outside the Shire than Frodo does, and they have no overarching wisdom to guide him. Nevertheless, even the Elves (who hate to give advice) urge him to take such friends as he can trust.

Frodo has a hard time accepting his friends' devotion. The reasons for this are hinted at but never explicitly stated. For one thing, his own sense of loyalty urges him to protect his friends by leaving them behind. But also, as an orphan, he has a profound fear of being abandoned—and if even Bilbo has left him, how can he trust these other friends? The Ring Frodo has carried for twelve years has surely had its effects, taking his sense of loss and amplifying it, whispering to him that there is no end to losing. Finally, and in a certain sense rightly, he does not consider himself worthy of such friends as would die for him.

But in spite of all this, and maybe even because of it, when Frodo's own loyalty is tested he chooses not to abandon his friends. When he and his companions are captured and buried in the Barrow Downs, and the wight is chanting a spell to hold them forever underground, Frodo has a sudden vision: he could slip on the Ring and escape alone, to run free upon the grass. He would





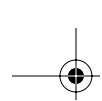
grieve his friends yet comfort himself that there was nothing else he could have done. No one would blame him for leaving them behind in that impossible situation. But then he would be as faithless as he fears his friends could be. The seed of courage buried deep in Hobbits opens up inside him then, and he calls out to Tom Bombadil.

They are all rescued, of course, but Frodo does not thereby lose his sense of doom. At every stage he is unwilling to allow his dearest friends to share in his peril. The Ring may be whispering that only one hand can wield it and that their loyalty is offered only in the hope that they might have a claim to it themselves. But in order for the quest to succeed, Frodo will, before the end, be required to learn the true nature of friendship and the importance of receiving it, trusting in it and leaning on it when his own considerable strength gives way.

When the hobbits finally reach Bree, they are confronted with an outsider who asks leave to join their Company. He is a rascally looking fellow, but another aspect of the Ring's influence on Frodo is that he can perceive things that others cannot. He understands implicitly that "all that is gold does not glitter" (I:212). Based on this perception he accepts Strider, little understanding who he truly is.

He is Aragorn, the chief of a band of Rangers whose self-appointed task is to protect the lands round about the Shire from trolls and wolves and other evils. He offers his services as a guide, but he expects something in return. He has the look of a rogue, but he is not after any money they might have. He has roamed on the fringes of civilization for many long years, and his





job has been thankless, yet he does not desire gratitude. He has long hidden his true identity as an heir of kings, but he does not wish for recognition. He has been lonely and misunderstood, and what he craves above all is simply friendship. The more the hobbits get to know this mysterious Ranger, the more remarkable does this fact become.

The friendship of Gandalf is equally remarkable. Although he is accounted mighty even by the strong, he never considers anyone beneath his notice or care. Indeed it is Gandalf's friendship that allows him to convince Bilbo to relinquish the Ring. Although he reveals a tiny portion of his power, looming over the hobbit threateningly, that is not the turning point; and had he not been Bilbo's friend, the move might have been disastrous, pushing Bilbo to use the Ring and escape. In the end Gandalf diminishes himself and says, "I wish you would trust me, as you used" (I:56). Only then does Bilbo relent.

"Many proclaim themselves loyal, / but who can find one worthy of trust?" (Proverbs 20:6). Most of us wish to be loyal to our friends but find it a difficult virtue in practice. When friendship gets in the way of our own aspirations, it is easy to find reasons for stopping short of a full commitment. It requires a servant's heart, like Sam's, to lay aside our plans, simple as they may be, and follow a friend into danger and exile, but that is precisely what true friends do.

