

“The world has changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost. For none now live who remember it. It began with the forging of the great rings. Three were given to the elves, immortal, wisest and fairest of all beings. Seven to the Dwarf Lords, great miners and craftsmen of the mountain halls. And nine were gifted to the race of men, who were to have these powers. For within these rings was bound the strength and will to govern each race.

*is what to do*

But they were all of them deceived for another ring was made. In the land of Mordor, in the fires of Mount Doom, the dark Lord Sauron forged in secret a master ring, to control all others, and into this ring, he poured his cruelty, his malice, and his will to dominate all life. One ring to rule them all.

One by one the free lands of Middle-earth fell to the power of the ring. But there were some who resisted. A last alliance of men and elves marched against the armies of Mordor and on the slopes of Mount Doom, they fought for the freedom of Middle-earth. Victory was near but the power of the ring could not be undone. It was in this moment when all hope had faded that Isildur, son of the King, took up his father's sword... Sauron, the enemy of the free peoples of Middle-earth was defeated.

The ring passed to Isildur, who had this one chance to destroy Evil forever. But the hearts of men are easily corrupted. And the ring of power has a will of its own. It betrayed Isildur to his death. And some things that should have been forgotten were lost. History became legend, legend became myth and for two and a half thousand years, the ring passed out of all knowledge until the darkness came, it ensnared a new bearer and came to the creature Gollum who took it deep into the tunnels of the misty mountains and there it consumed him. The ring brought to Gollum unnatural long life. For five hundred

years, it poisoned his mind. And in the gloom of Gollum's cave, it waited.

Darkness crept back into the forests of the world. A shadow of a shadow, a whisper of a nameless fear and the ring of power perceived its time had now come. It abandoned Gollum. But something happened then the ring did not intend. It was picked up by the most unlikely creature imaginable: a Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire. For the times will soon come when Hobbits will shape the fortunes of all...

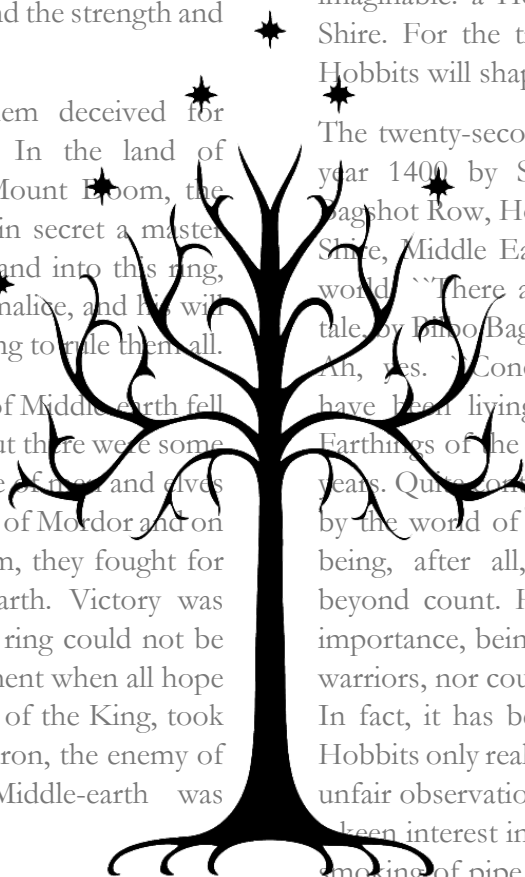
The twenty-second day of September in the year 1400 by Shire reckoning. Bag End, Bagshot Row, Hobbiton, West Farthing, The Shire, Middle Earth. The Third Age of this world. There and back again, A Hobbit's tale, by Bilbo Baggins". Now, where to begin? Ah, yes. "Concerning Hobbits". Hobbits have been living and farming in the four Farthings of the Shire for many hundreds of years. Quite content to ignore and be ignored by the world of the Big Folk. Middle Earth being, after all, full of strange creatures beyond count. Hobbits must seem of little importance, being neither renowned as great warriors, nor counted amongst the very wise. In fact, it has been remarked by some that Hobbits only real passion is for food. A rather unfair observation as we have also developed a keen interest in the brewing of ales and the smoking of pipe weed. But where our hearts truly lie is in peace and quiet and good tilled earth. For all Hobbits share a love of all things that grow. And yes, no doubt to others, our ways seem quaint. But today of all days, it is brought home to me it is no bad thing to celebrate a simple life.

And so life in the Shire goes on, very much as it has this past age. Full of its own comings and goings, change coming slowly, if it comes at all. For things are made to endure in the Shire, passing from one generation to the next. There's always been a Baggins living here under the Hill, in Bag End. And there always will be."

*All we have to decide*

*with the time*

*that is given us*



“There were once three brothers who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight. In time, the brothers reached a river too deep to wade through and too dangerous to swim across. However, these brothers were learned in the magical arts, and so they simply waved their wands and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it when they found the path blocked by a hooded figure.

And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travelers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him.

So the oldest brother, who was a combative man, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence: a wand that must always win duels for its owner, a wand worthy of a wizard who had conquered Death! So Death crossed to an elder tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branch that hung there, and gave it to the oldest brother.

Then the second brother, who was an arrogant man, decided that he wanted to humiliate Death still further, and asked for the power to recall others from Death. So Death picked up a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second brother, and told him that the stone would have the power to bring back the dead.

And then Death asked the youngest brother what he would like. The youngest brother was the humblest and also the wisest of the brothers, and he did not trust Death. So he asked for something that would enable him to go forth from this place without being followed by Death. And Death, almost unwillingly, handed over his own Cloak of Invisibility.

Then Death stood aside and allowed the three brothers to continue on their way, and they did so, talking with wonder of the adventure

they had had, and admiring Death's gifts. In due course the brothers separated, each for his own destination.

The first brother traveled on for some time more, and reaching a distant village, sought out a fellow wizard with whom he had a quarrel. Naturally with the Elder Wand as his weapon he could not fail to win the duel that followed. Leaving his enemy dead upon the floor, the brother proceeded to an inn, where he boasted loudly of the powerful wand he had snatched from Death himself, and of how it made him invincible.

That very night, another wizard crept upon the oldest brother as he lay, wine-sodden, upon his bed. The thief took the wand and, for good measure, slit the oldest brother's throat.

And Death took the first brother for his own.

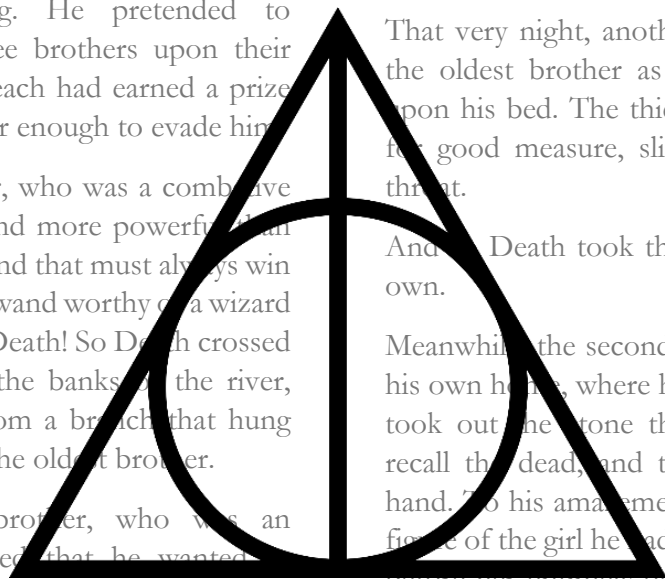
Meanwhile the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone. Here he took out the stone that had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in his hand. To his amazement and his delight, the figure of the girl he had once hoped to marry, before her untimely death, appeared at once before him.

Yet she was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did not truly belong there and suffered. Finally, the second brother, in a fit of despair, killed himself so as truly to join her.

And so Death took the second brother for his own.

But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him. It was only when he had attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.”

*Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times...*



*...if one only remembers to*

*turn on the light.*

“Dacey Mormont, who seemed to be the only woman left in the hall besides Catelyn, stepped up behind Edwyn Frey, and touched him lightly on the arm as she said something in his ear. Edwyn pulled himself away from her with unseemly violence. “No,” he said, too loudly. “I’m done with dancing for the nonce.” Dacey paled and turned away. Catelyn got slowly to her feet. What just happened there? She gripped her head, where an instant before had been only weariness. It is nothing, she tried to tell herself, you are seeing grumkins in the woodpile, you are become an old silly woman sick with grief and fear. But something must have shown on her face. Even Ser Wendel Manderly took note. “Is something amiss?” he asked, the leg of lamb in his hands.

She did not answer him. Instead she slapped Edwyn Frey. The players in the hall had finally gotten both king and queen to their name-day suits. With a moment’s respite, they began to play a different sort of song. No one spoke words, but Catelyn knew “The Rains of Castamere” when she heard it. Edwyn was hurrying toward a door. She hurried after him. Six quick strikes caught him. And who are you, the king said, that I must bow so low? She grabbed Edwyn by the arm to turn him and went cold all over when she felt the iron rings beneath his silken sleeve.

Catelyn slapped him so hard she broke his lip. Olyvar, she thought, and Eorwyn, Alesander, all absent. And Roslin shoved her aside. The music drowned all other sound, echoing off the walls as if the stones themselves were playing. Robb gave Edwyn an angry look and moved to block his way... and staggered suddenly as a quarrel sprouted from his side, just beneath the shoulder. If he screamed then, the sound was swallowed by the pipes and horns and fiddles. Catelyn saw a second bolt pierce his leg, saw him fall. Up in the gallery, half the musicians had crossbows in their hands instead of

drums or lutes. She ran toward her son, until something punched in the small of the back and the hard stone floor came up to slap her. “Robb!” she screamed. She saw Smalljon Umber’s crossbow bolts thudded into the wood, one two three, as he flung it down on top of his king. Robin Flint was ringed by Freys, their daggers rising and falling. Ser Wendel Manderly ponderously to his feet, holding his leg of lamb. A quarrel went in his open mouth and came out the back of his neck. Ser Wendel crashed forward, knocking the table off its trestles and sending cups, flacons, trenchers, platters, turnips, beets, and wine bouncing, spilling, and sliding across the floor.

Catelyn’s back was on fire. I have to reach Robb. Smalljon bludgeoned Ser Raymund Cross with a leg of mutton. But he reached for his swordbelt a bolt drove him to his knees. In a moment of gold or a coat of red, a lion still has the heart of a lion. He saw Lucas Blackwood cut down by a Frey. One of the Vances was killed by Black Walder as he was fleeing with Ser Harys Haigh. And mine are the best carp, my lord, as long and sharp as the crossbows took Donnel Locke, Owen Barrey, and half a dozen more. Young Ser Benfrey had seized Dacey Mormont by the arm, but Catelyn saw her grab up a flagon of wine with her other hand, smash it full in his face, and run for the door. It flew open before she reached it. Ser Ryman Frey pushed into the hall, clad in steel from helm to heel. He was followed by men-at-arms packed the door behind him. They were armed with heavy longaxes.

“Mercy!” Catelyn cried, but horns and drums and the clash of steel smothered her plea. Ser Ryman buried the head of his axe in Dacey’s stomach. By then men were pouring in the other doors as well, mailed men in shaggy fur cloaks with steel in their hands. Northmen! She took them for rescue for half a heartbeat, till one of them struck the Smalljon head off.

*Summer friends will melt away like summer snows...*



*but winter friends are friends forever.*