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Frodo's Batman

MARK T. HOOKER

But be not afraid of greatness. Some men are born great,
some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust
upon them.

—William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

While *The Lord of the Rings* was not published until the early 1950s, it is nevertheless to some extent a product not of World War II but of the six months during which Tolkien fought with the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers during World War I, before trench fever took him back to England. Tolkien wrote that Sam was “a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself” (Carpenter 91).

For the modern reader, the most likely association with the word *batman* is Batman and Robin of film and comic book fame. Tolkien, however, had another image in mind. Before World War II, when officers were indeed gentlemen, in the British sense of the word, having a soldier-servant was the accepted order of the day. The word *batman* comes not from cricket bats, as some have suggested, but from the French word *bât*, which means *pack saddle*. A batman was, therefore, the man who took care of the luggage carried on the pack-horse or pack-mule. In time, the word also came to mean an officer's valet, who, among other things, also took care of his officer's baggage.

The literature of World War I recounts a number of examples of the loyalty and devotion of batmen to the officers they cared for. An examination of these stories, which were written by British line officers who, like Tolkien, saw combat in World War I, offers an insight into the kind of batmen with whom lieutenant Tolkien came into contact in the 1914 war. We have no evidence that Tolkien read these stories himself, but the characteristics of the batmen described in them are much the same as the characteristics that Tolkien ascribes to Sam. “He [Sam] did not think of himself as heroic or even brave, or in any way admirable—except in his service and loyalty to his master,” wrote Tolkien in a letter to a reader (*Letters* 329).

William Noel Hodgson (1893-1916) wrote under the pseudonym “Edward Melbourne.” A lieutenant with the Devonshire Regiment, he died in the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He was a Georgian poet

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in the style of Rupert Brooke, and he also wrote stories and essays about the war. His short story "Pearson"¹ is a tale about his resourceful batman named Pearson (77-81). Lieutenant Colonel Graham Seton Hutchison (1890-1946)—the author of numerous books on World War I—wrote a biography of his batman, Peter McLintock (*Biography of a Batman* 211-22).

The relationship between Hodgson and his batman is the kind that P. G. Wodehouse (1881-1975) parodied in his Jeeves and Wooster stories. Shortly after Jeeves had been engaged, Bertie Wooster tries to establish who is in charge in their relationship by saying that he is not one of those men who becomes an absolute slave to his valet. Jeeves' irreproachably polite reply, however, leaves no doubt as to the absurdity of Bertie's statement ("Jeeves Takes Charge" 8). Hodgson's story, being much more compact, gets straight to the point. Hodgson has learned that it is best to "acquiesce in all that Pearson does":

He is my servant, and if he were Commander-in-Chief, the war would be over in a week. But I should get no baths, so I am glad he isn't. And I doubt whether he would care to be, himself; at present he is supreme in his own sphere, and knows it and knows that the other servants know it. The only thing that he does not know is his own limitations—nobody else does either—they have never been reached. . . . A good soldier servant is one of the greatest marvels of our modern civilization. To possess one is better and cheaper than living next door to Harrods. Do you want a chair for the [Officers'] Mess? You have only to mention it to Pearson. Are you starving in a deserted village? Pearson will find you wine, bread and eggs. Are you sick of a fever? Pearson will heal you. From saving your life to sewing on your buttons, he is infallible. (77)

To prove his point about Pearson's ingenuity, Hodgson offers the reader some concrete examples. Having relocated his unit into some filthy trenches, Hodgson soon discovers that he is infested with lice. Pearson's unhesitating reaction to this news is that the lieutenant requires a bath and a change of clothes. He will see to it. Hodgson, bowing to what he perceives as the reality of trench warfare, dismisses Pearson's reply with a joke. If Pearson would be so kind as to call him a cab, he could drop in on his tailors on the way to the Jermyn Street Baths. The reality of trench warfare, however, proved to be what Pearson made of it. A short while later, Pearson called Hodgson back to his dug-out, where a hot bath and change of clothes awaited. To those who have never experienced the privations of combat, Hodgson's description of this exploit as "epic" may

seem overblown. It is not. In combat, where clean, dry socks seem worth their weight in gold, a warm bath and a complete change of clothes would ransom a host of kings.

Hodgson's mention of Pearson finding a chair for the Officers' Mess is echoed in the other story he tells about Pearson. The empty house that they had taken over to use as the Officers' Mess had a cold stone floor. In response to a comment by the President of the Mess, Hodgson offhandedly volunteers Pearson to get them a carpet to make the Mess more comfortable. This time it is the President of the Mess who represents the accepted perception of the reality of life in a combat zone in World War I. He doubts that it is possible; after all, "the boy is not a conjurer." Hodgson's belief in Pearson's "genius" prompted him to bet the President of the Mess five francs that Pearson could produce a carpet for the Mess by tea time the next day. The most likely source of carpets in the area was a nearby town that was under daily enemy artillery fire. Pearson asked Hodgson for permission to go to the town to look for a carpet, but Hodgson refused because of the danger. The next day, just before the deadline for the bet, Pearson appeared in the Mess, covered in sweat, carrying a carpet and two rolls of linoleum. He had gone to the town anyway, because Hodgson had not expressly forbidden him to go. "I could not let you lose a bet, sir, for the sake of a little trouble," said Pearson.

As if in anticipation of the incredulous, modern, peacetime reader, Hodgson closes his paean to Pearson with the comment that "there are many like him, I am sure, though I prefer to think of him as supreme. But when next a soldier friend boasts of his servant—as they always do—sooner or later, remember that he is not always such a liar as he appears." Tolkien's readers would do well to remember Hodgson's caution, when they consider Sam's role in Tolkien's works. Tolkien is—as Hodgson put it—"boasting" about the batmen of his acquaintance, all rolled into one fictional character. "You're a marvel," says Frodo to Sam in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, echoing Hodgson's comment about Pearson, when Sam produces the Ring that Frodo had imagined lost (*RK*, VI, i, 188).

Hutchison's batman was named Peter McLintock. He was, said Hutchison, "the best, most intimate friend man ever had" (211). He was "a faithful servant, a friend and counselor, an ever-present companion to give me confidence in the darkness of a dangerous night, and good cheer, when fortune favored a visit to battalion headquarters" (215).

[Peter's] friendliness took complete possession of the necessary, though often inconvenient, affairs of life. In such things Peter's service was priceless. No matter at what hour I would return to the cubby hole for sleep, it was as dry and as warm as human ingenuity could devise. Eggs and small

comforts he conjured from behind the lines without any promptings from me. . . . He would . . . prepare a varied menu from interminable bread, plum-and-apple jam, and the sickly meat and vegetable ration. He would clean my limited wardrobe, wash and mend the socks and shirts, keep me supplied with tobacco, dry my boots and stockings. The batman was *Multum in parvo* to his charge, omnipresent, yet ubiquitous. . . . And he would run when his officer went over the top, and fight by his side. When the officer dropped, the batman was beside him.” (219-20)

Peter’s friendship expressed itself in “little acts of vigilant kindness. Opportunities for the rendering of trifling services and for the doing of kindness were for ever present, every hour and every day. The batman’s attitude was one of selfsubordination, and he tarried neither to consider the worthiness of his charge nor the nature of the service asked. He gave freely, the man of humble origin and pursuit, to one at least temporarily exalted with authority. By his ready service, words and gestures he won affection, by his forethought and unknown sacrifices he penetrated quietly and unobtrusively into the heart of the master of his goings and of his comings.” (221-22).

These two short stories by Hodgson and Hutchison taken together provide a list of traits that any good batman should have. Sam has a great many of them. He does not have the trait of healing, which Tolkien gives to others of more stately bearing, like Elrond and Aragorn. He also has no opportunity to dry Frodo’s boots and stockings, since Hobbits do not wear shoes.

Tolkien clearly establishes the relationship between Sam and Frodo as “master” and “servant” by spreading those two descriptors throughout the text. As Frodo prepares to leave the Shire, the excuse given for Sam going with him is that Sam was going “to do for Mr. Frodo” (*FR*, I, iii, 78), which is another way of saying that he is going to be Frodo’s valet or butler. At the feast in Rivendale, Sam begs to be allowed “to wait on his master” (*FR*, II, i, 240). Tolkien accentuates this by peppering Sam’s speech with plenty of “Mr. Frodo, sir,” echoing the customary form of address of a valet to his master and a soldier to an officer. Tolkien also drops a number of hints as to Sam’s duties at Bag End as the story progresses. As Frodo awakens in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, for example, Sam tries “to sound as cheerful as he had when he drew back the curtains at Bag End on a summer’s morning” (*RK*, VI, i, 187). This phrase evokes an image almost straight out of Jeeves and Wooster. Tolkien makes Sam

sound almost like Jeeves, when Sam replies with an unperturbed “Very good, sir!” to Frodo’s announcement that he is leaving the Shire for good and that neither of them may ever come back (*FR*, I, iv, 96).

Hodgson’s comment about having to give up hot baths were Pearson to become Commander-in-Chief and his story about the clean clothes and the hot bath find a brief reflection in Tolkien’s tale in Pippin’s off-hand comment upon awakening in the fir-wood after their first night out of the Shire. Pippin commands Sam to have his breakfast ready at nine thirty, and inquires if his bath water is hot yet (*FR*, I, iii, 81). Both requests would be logical, if made of a batman or valet, and Sam takes no offense at them, reflecting Hutchison’s description of Peter McLintock’s attitude of selfsubordination, which Hutchison said kept him from considering the nature of the service asked or the worthiness of his charge.

While Sam clearly has an attitude of selfsubordination, he, unlike Hutchison’s Peter McLintock, does have a considered opinion as to the worthiness of his charge. Sam had always felt that Frodo was so kind that he was in some ways blind to what went on around him. At the same time he held fast to the contradictory opinion, that Frodo “was the wisest person in the world” (with the possible exception of Bilbo and Gandalf) (*TT*, IV, iii, 248). In fact, Sam loved Mr. Frodo (*TT*, IV, iv, 260; *RK*, VI, i, 177). This is a very different picture of the relationship between an officer and his batman than the ones presented in Hodgson’s and Hutchison’s short stories. Perhaps Pearson and McLintock both loved their charges, too, but their charges were simply not aware of the fact, just as Hutchison was not aware of all the sacrifices that McLintock made for him.

One of Hutchison’s “unknown sacrifices” can be found echoed in the chapter “Mount Doom,” in which Frodo and Sam are struggling through Mordor toward their final goal, almost out of water to drink. Sam lets Frodo drink from their meager supply of water, but does not drink any himself (*RK*, VI, iii, 213, 216). Frodo is almost unaware of everything at this point (*RK*, VI, iii, 215), but the narrator lets the reader in on Sam’s secret. Earlier in the tale, as they are just leaving the Shire, Tolkien has Frodo complain in jest that they have saddled him with all the heaviest things in his pack. Sam stoutly volunteers to take on some of Frodo’s burden, saying that his pack is quite light, which the narrator pointedly informs the reader is a not true. At this stage of their journey, Frodo is still alert enough to recognize that Sam is making a sacrifice for him, and makes a resolution to look into it at their next packing (*FR*, I, iii, 80).

Forethought was one of Hutchison’s characteristics for Peter McLintock. Sam shows himself worthy of this appellation in the scene in which he is checking the contents of his pack, one that Aragorn notes was “rather large and heavy” (*TT*, III, i, 21). It held Sam’s “chief

treasure,” his cooking utensils, a box of salt, a supply of tobacco, flint and tinder for starting fires, woolen hose, linen, and a number of small things that Frodo had forgotten, that Sam planned to produce in triumph when Frodo asked for them on the trail (*FR*, II, iii, 293). One of these items finds a special resonance in Hutchison’s comment about how McLintock kept him supplied with tobacco, as well as in Tolkien’s tale, where a whole segment of the “Prologue” is devoted to “pipe-weed” (*FR*, ProL., 17-18). Most importantly for the story, Sam’s pack also held a length of Elvish rope, which they would need later in the mountains (*TT*, IV, i, 214-17). At the Breaking of the Fellowship, Sam is the one who “grabbed a spare blanket and some extra packages of food” before they left (*FR*, II, x, 423). All these things point to Sam’s forethought.

McLintock’s “little acts of vigilant kindness,” as Hutchison termed them, can be seen in Sam’s actions too. In the morning, after the Hobbits’ first encounter with the elves on their way to Rivendale, for example, Frodo awakes to find Pippin already up. Pippin prods him to get up and have some of the food that the elves left them. The bread was as delicious as it was the night before and Pippin would have eaten it all, if Sam had not insisted that he leave some for Frodo (*FR*, I, iv, 95).

Both Hodgson and Hutchison comment on their batman’s skill at supplementing their rations. In “Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit,” Sam exhibits the same sort of initiative as was exhibited by the two real-life batmen, by “conjuring up”—as Hutchison put it—some rabbits for Frodo to eat. That Gollum was actually the one who caught the rabbits is unimportant. It was Sam who sent him out to hunt them (*TT*, IV, iv, 260). The same was probably true of Pearson and McLintock. To the batman’s charge, it was not important who took the eggs out from under the chicken, but rather who arranged for them to appear unexpectedly on his plate at breakfast.

Hodgson’s image of Pearson coming up with “wine, bread and eggs” when he was “starving in a deserted village” finds its reflection in Tolkien’s chapter on the Tower of Cirith Ungol. The tower could hardly have been more deserted. It was strewn with the bodies of the Orcs that had killed one another (*RK*, VI, i, 179). Tolkien plays on the emptiness, repeating it for effect. “[I]t was empty, save for two or three more bodies sprawling on the floor. . . . The dead bodies, the emptiness,” intones the narrator. “‘I do believe that there’s nobody left alive in the place! . . . I’ve met nothing alive, and I’ve seen nothing,’ said Sam” (*RK*, VI, i, 181, 189). The plot line remains the same in Tolkien’s version of the tale, but there is a slight adjustment to the details. It is not that Sam found them some food. His find was some clothing for Frodo. It was Frodo himself who found the food among some rags on the floor (*RK*, VI, i, 190). Sam’s success in his scavenger hunt for clothes is no less a triumph

of “conjuring,” as both Hodgson and Hutchison put it, even though he was not the one to find the food.

Hodgson's comment about the range of Pearson's services is likewise echoed in Tolkien's tale. Hodgson pairs saving his life with sewing on his buttons to show the incredibly wide gamut of services that Pearson provided for him. In Tolkien's tale, the explicit comparison is missing, but the attentive reader can easily construct a similar one from the events of the tale. Saving Frodo's life comes most vividly to mind in “The Choices of Master Samwise,” in which Sam defends Frodo from Shelob. Sam, in fact, stood ready on numerous occasions to defend Frodo. For example, as the company flees the Black Riders on their way to Buckland, the narrator says that the Black Riders would have to ride over Sam to get to the wagon where Frodo was hidden (*FR*, I, iv, 106). Pippin says, “‘Sam is an excellent fellow and would jump down a dragon's throat to save you’” (*FR*, I, v, 114). These efforts at saving Frodo's life can easily be paired with the simple task of having Sam run down to his home to drop off the key to Bag End as they departed (*FR*, I, iii, 79). Sewing on a button or dropping off a key are inconsequential services when compared to saving one's life, but they are part and parcel of the job of a batman.

Tolkien also manages to work in a jest in much the same vein as Hodgson's throw-away line about calling him a cab so that he could drop in on his tailors on the way to the Jermyn Street Baths. In the Tower of Cirith Ungol, after Sam frees Frodo from the Orcs, and they prepare to flee the tower, Frodo, with a wry smile, poses the equally nonsensical question of whether Sam has made inquiries about inns along the way (*RK*, VI, i, 190). In the context of *LotR*, Hutchison's description of the confidence that McLintock's companionship gave him in the darkness of a dangerous night finds a special resonance in Tolkien's tale of a journey into a land of unabated darkness. Hutchison's terse description pales, of course, in comparison to the detail of Tolkien's, but the two, nevertheless, describe the same bond to be found between an officer and his batman in combat.

Understanding this relationship is one of the key difficulties for the modern, peacetime reader. An officer and his batman were from different social classes. While Frodo represents the English officer and gentleman, born to greatness, as it were, Sam—like Pearson and McLintock—was not born to greatness, but had greatness thrust upon him. The change in the relationship between Sam and Frodo as the quest progresses reflects a change in the English class structure that was brought about by World War I. The literate divide, for example, was only one of a number of very real class factors that were a part of Tolkien's time. The need for reading and writing was not at all a universally accepted idea among Hobbits. Bilbo had taught Sam to read and write, but Sam's father was not so sure

that it was a good idea (*FR*, I, i,32).

In his short story “Half and Half,” Hodgson explains how the factor of class difference was made less distinct by the war. This is the story of a sergeant from the Highlands, whom Hodgson deftly characterizes by replicating the sergeant’s accent, a technique that Tolkien also used, though sparingly. In Tolkien’s tale, Sam’s father, the Gaffer, and a stranger from Michel Delving both say “jools” instead of “jewels,” the crowning touch to a dialogue full of turns of phrase that mark them as men of limited education. Sam’s dialogue is peppered with a number of less obvious turns of phrase that clearly mark him as a member of that class as well. Hodgson’s story begins with the sergeant asking: “Wull Ah tell ye the tale of Micheal Starr that wes in oor regiment?” (103). This opening line characterizes the sergeant much more deftly and economically than a long, detailed narration. He was a “man of humble origin and pursuit,” as Hutchison termed McLintock.

Having established who the sergeant was, Hodgson turns quickly to the relationship between himself—an officer and a gentleman—and the sergeant. “It was curious,” said Hodgson, “how intimate we had become, he and I, although at the time neither of us was aware of the incongruity.” The incongruity that Hodgson finds “curious” was that in peacetime, neither the sergeant, nor Hodgson would have had a relationship that allowed them to swap stories in the fashion described in Hodgson’s short story. This is the same incongruity that troubles the modern peacetime reader. In the next sentence, Hodgson explains how this change in their relationship had come about. “There are, I suppose, times when an unconscious strain tunes all our natures up to a single note, and though he was as fully armed with the carelessness of experience as I was with the recklessness of ignorance, we must both of us have been at high tension, for as I realized two days later I had had neither bite nor sup for thirty hours and never knew I was hungry.” Tolkien shows exactly the same fine edge of the strain of combat in “The Tower of Cirith Ungol,” in which, having rescued Frodo, Sam is reminded of food and water by Frodo’s wry question about the inns along the way. “I don’t know when drop or morsel last passed my lips. I’d forgotten it, trying to find you,” says Sam (*RK*, VI, i, 190).

Relationships like these, forged in the strain of combat, changed post-war English society profoundly. In Tolkien’s version of this change, Sam becomes Frodo’s heir, and goes on to become Mayor of the Shire, the most famous gardener in history, and keeper of the knowledge of the Red Book (*RK*, VI, ix, 309). It is an interesting change, that has Sam wearing more than one hat, which is an aptly appropriate metaphor for English society, which indeed did, and to some extent still does, judge

a man's social status by the hat that he wears. Sam moved up in social status, but kept to his roots. The change in the society of the Shire is also less widespread than in England after World War I. Sam was, after all, the only representative of his class to participate in the perilous adventure that reshaped class relationships. There were a great many more British private soldiers and batmen who went off to war and discovered that things could be different.

Sam's participation in the quest to destroy the Ring was a "punishment" for eavesdropping on Frodo and Gandalf, when they were planning Frodo's departure (*FR*, I, ii, 73). Gandalf does not say what kind of punishment Sam will receive. A reader with no foreknowledge of the tale could suppose that the punishment would be having to leave the Shire (uncommon for Hobbits), or that it would be exhausting, or uncomfortable, or even terrifying, but because Tolkien does not say what the punishment is, the reader—and Sam—are not immediately scared off by it. Sam's reaction to this "punishment" is one of enthusiasm. He is happy to go, because he will get to see "Elves and all! Hooray!" (*FR*, I, ii, 73). It is only later—much like the British soldiers who went off to World War I full of enthusiasm—that Sam will find out how terrifying his quest is. "And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started," says Sam to Frodo (*TT*, IV, viii, 320).

Tolkien repeats the plot line of Sam listening at the window later in the episode at the Council of Elrond, but with a slight difference. Sam has taken up his new job of batman, helping and serving Frodo. Elrond's pronouncement upon discovering Sam, therefore, is not a punishment, as was Gandalf's, but an evaluation of his performance in his new role as Frodo's batman (*FR*, II, ii, 284). From this point on Sam is Frodo's "ever-present companion," to use Hutchison's description of his batman, Peter McLintock.

As Frodo and Sam discuss leaving Lórien to get on with their quest, Tolkien shows Sam in the role of counselor, another of Hutchison's descriptions of Peter:

"You're right," said Sam. . . . I don't want to leave. All the same, I'm beginning to feel that if we've got to go on, then we'd best get it over.

"*It's the job that's never started as takes longest to finish*, as my old gaffer used to say. And I don't reckon that these folk can do much more to help us, magic or no." (*FR*, II, vii, 376)

Job is a key word in the story, and Tolkien repeats it again and again to help define Sam's character and explain his motivation. The word *job* presents a problem for some modern—especially American—readers who think first of *mac-jobs* and unskilled labor, and only later, if at all,

think of the other meanings of the word *job* that were more common in the time that Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *job* as:

job \jăb\ n. 1: a piece of work 2: something that has to be done: DUTY 3: a regular remunerative position — jobless
adj. 12

Sam's job has to be understood in the context of the duty of a batman: to serve and protect his charge. The second meaning from *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*—*duty*—comes clearly to the fore in “The Tower of Cirith Ungol,” in which Sam “turned quickly and ran back up the stairs. ‘Wrong again, I expect,’ he sighed. ‘But it’s my job to go right up to the top first, whatever happens afterwards’” (*RK*, VI, i, 184).

As Sam and Frodo draw closer to Mount Doom, Tolkien's attention returns to Sam's job. Even though his death appears to be the most likely outcome, duty and honor require that Sam—like Hutchison's and Hodgson's batmen—go on. “‘So that was the job I felt I had to do when I started,’ thought Sam: ‘to help Mr. Frodo to the last step and then die with him? Well, if that is the job then I must do it’” (*RK*, VI, iii, 211). Tolkien's description of Sam's job here is exactly the same as the job description that Hutchison gives for a batman: “And he would run when his officer went over the top, and fight by his side. When the officer dropped, the batman was beside him.”

Hodgson was killed during an attack on German positions south of Mametz. Pearson was found dead at his side. They are buried together with their comrades in arms in the trench they died taking. Peter McLintock died at Hutchison's side and is buried in Ration Farm Military Cemetery, la Chapelle-d'Armentières, France. Tolkien gave the story of his batman a happy ending: Sam returned to the Shire to marry his sweetheart, Rose Cotton.

Sam's job was indeed a “punishment,” and in more ways than just the privations that he suffered when he accompanied Frodo to Mount Doom and back. To do his job, Sam had to leave Rose Cotton and she was not particularly pleased with him for that. She viewed the year that he was gone with Frodo as “wasted” (*RK*, VI, ix, 304). This, in general, mirrors a feeling about the service of private soldiers (enlisted men) that was widespread in England in the period following World War I.

NOTE

- 1 Dated March 23, 1916

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