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Tolkien 2000 Contest
Humorous Entry Winner- Mike Hess

Foreword

Sometimes, in dealing with history, indeed the tale does grow in the telling. Often the story that reaches our ears is much different after it has passed through many generations. Often we find, on closer examination, that historical facts that we take for granted, have been altered as they come down to us through the ages.

What if this has happened with the history of the One Ring? What if things actually happened differently from what we have been led to believe?

For instance, consider the possibility that Frodo emerged victorious from his struggle with Gollum on the brink of the Cracks of Doom? Of course, we must also allow that, against all odds, he was able to elude the endlessly searching Eye in Barad dur, and escape the eight relentlessly pursuing Nazgul.

Little time should be spared worrying over how Frodo might accomplish such feats. For who among us, when charged with the daunting task of recounting the history of these events, would not quail at the impossibility of explaining the unimaginable?

Okay look, if you just have to know, it's like this. Gollum actually trips and does his swandive into the Cracks of Doom before he can get the Ring away from Frodo. Then, as the Nazgul appear one at a time, like in a Saturday night martial arts movie, Frodo, having finally discovered how to tap into the Ring's power of command, orders them each in turn to throw themselves into the consuming fires of Orodruin.

This in turn sets off a mysterious phenomenon known only to the wise as an n-dimensional, Metaphasic, Ruling Ring, Infinite Feedback Loop, which causes Mount Doom to erupt and the Nine Rings for Mortal Men in Sauron's possession to explode so violently that Barad dur crumbles to the ground, and Sauron's disincorporated spirit is sent cartwheeling right through the void and out the other side.

Thus, it would have appeared even to the wise that the Ruling Ring has been destroyed when in fact, it has been slipped back into a hidden pocket in Frodo's cloak.

Some minor changes would necessarily follow...

(Editor's note: Where the following text differs from the original in matters of distance and time, see the first paragraph of the foreword.)

The Flushing of the Shire

The company of the Ring, tired and more than a little cranky, reached the Brandywine Bridge just as the last traces of dusk were disappearing from the western sky. Unexpectedly, they found a sturdy iron gate barring their way. At the far end of the Bridge could be seen another gate apparently closed and locked as well. New and unfamiliar structures loomed on the other side of the Brandywine.

Frodo, having developed a tendency to go red in the left eye in times of stress, rapped violently on the gate with the hilt of Sting. "Open this gate! What has the world come to when friendly Hobbits are left standing out in the rain at the Shire's front gate?"

His voice boomed across the bridge and down the road beyond, and along the river in both directions. No Hobbit of the Shire had ever before heard such a voice issuing from the mouth of another Hobbit. But now that they had, it would not be the last time.

Nobody in the company dared to mention that it wasn't raining.

Bilbo, still trying to figure out why he had agreed to come back to the Shire, aroused himself from his reverie to point to a sign on the gate barely visible in the deepening gloom. "No admittance between sundown and sunrise" he mumbled, as if to himself.

Just then, the door to the guard shack on the far end of the bridge banged open, and a number of Hobbits began to pour out into the lane muttering fearfully amongst themselves. Frodo turned and scowled at Bilbo, "I can see what it says," he snapped.

"Gandalf!" He spat, gesturing to the rear of the company where the old wizard stood with the others, an oddly vacant look in his eyes. "Down with it!" he said sternly, gesturing at the sign. The old wizard stepped forward, and with a carefully aimed blow from Glamdring, the sign fell sundered to the ground. Gandalf stepped back to his former position, having uttered not a word.

"Sign?" asked Frodo innocently, sparing a sharp warning look for Sam, who appeared ready to speak up on Bilbo's behalf as he had found himself doing so often in recent days. "What sign?"

The gate at the far end of the bridge had been thrown open and a crowd of timid-looking Hobbits began to mill across the bridge, looking as though they would rather be home having their teeth cleaned with a garden trowel. Their apparent fear was magnified by the sight of the company that waited on the far side of the gate.

Seeing Frodo in his mithril shirt, brandishing Sting, and scowling deeply, his left eye glowing an ominous crimson, would be enough to throw any decent Hobbit off his mushrooms. It only made matters worse to see four dispirited, yet well-armed Hobbits huddled around him and another three tall, shadowy figures looming in the background.

A pony stood dejectedly at the rear of the company, a heavy burden of lumpy looking sacks strapped across its back.

"Wh-what is it?" Their leader stammered reluctantly. "N-nobody is allowed through the gate after sundown. It's against th-the rules." He flinched as the red eye turned on him. He stumbled back into the crowd as if stricken by a physical blow.

Recognizing the speaker, Merry spoke up quietly, a note of sympathy in his voice. "I recognize you Hob Hayward. It's good to see you again, but if I were you, I'd keep talk about rules to a minimum. Trust me on this."

As Merry spoke, Frodo's gaze softened. "How about a new rule?" he said matter-of-factly, almost pleasantly. "Anybody who doesn't do exactly as I tell them, without asking a bunch of silly Hobbit questions or engaging in a bunch of silly Hobbit chatter, gets tossed into the river with horseshoes in his back pocket." He smiled cheerfully.

"Any takers? No?" he asked and answered without hesitation, "So let's test your gate opening skills shall we?"

His apparently softening mood had done little to ease the horrified expressions of the gathered crowd, but several of them rushed forward, practically falling over each other to unlock the gate. Hobbits are well known for their skill in the matter of predicting weather, especially when it comes to knowing which way the wind is blowing.

As the Company pushed through the gate, and across the bridge, the sound of another door opening could be heard from the large house on the right side of the road. "What's Going on!?" a surly voice demanded.

"Bill Ferny." Said Frodo, exuding good-natured comradery. "Boy am I glad to see you."

"What's this? Gate crashers and hooligans? The Chief will hear about this." He sneered. "Shoulda known better than to leave a buncha little people to guard the gate. Away with you if you know what's good..." He had begun by shouting but before he could finish, his voice had trailed off into little more than a whisper.

As he approached the gate, he had caught a better glimpse of quite a lot of bristling steel, not to mention a dull red glow.

"Come here Bill. I have a surprise for you," said Frodo insistently. Slowly, Ferny came forward, legs jerking awkwardly as if in an unsuccessful attempt to betray their master. "Stand right here," he said, taking out a charcoal tipped stick and drawing a large X on a spot about halfway across the bridge.

Fear and confusion fighting for control of his features, Bill Ferny obeyed helplessly, shuffling over to the spot Frodo had marked.

"Gandalf!" Frodo snapped. "You know what to do." Then he gestured toward Hobbiton and added "the rest of you, follow me."

As the company, followed by their dispirited pony and a group of wary Hobbits reached the other end of the bridge, Frodo turned to look at Bill Ferny. The Breelander watched Gandalf's approach in a trance until the old wizard stood directly in front of him and raised his staff menacingly over his head.

With the entire company looking on, Gandalf brought the staff down with a loud crack on the edge of the bridge. A sheet of white flame erupted from a fissure that had suddenly appeared across the width of the bridge. With a groan, the entire span collapsed into the Brandywine river below, taking Gandalf and Bill Ferny with it.

Frodo chuckled to himself. "I LOVE it when he does that."

One of the tall figures accompanying the party stepped forward, and spoke hesitantly. "Do you think this course of action is wise. He is a powerful ally to be wasted in such a way."

"Look Ronnie" Frodo replied in exasperation, "I've told you before, when I want to hear your opinion, I'll give it to you." The revealed face of Elrond, already a study in despair, fell even further. "Besides" he added with a knowing smile, "he'll be back."

As he spoke, his gaze scanned the far shore. "See?" He said, gesturing to where a white-cloaked figure could dimly be seen in the gathering darkness, crawling from the swirling waters of the Brandywine. "Hey Mister 'The White!'" He yelled. "You're on the wrong side. I hope you're a good swimmer!"

From far across the river, Gandalf's broad shoulders could be seen to sag. He hesitated only momentarily however, before hiking up his robe and wading back into the water. As it turned out, he was a good swimmer, and in a matter of moments was clambering up onto the shore on the Hobbiton side of the Brandywine.

Without a word, he rejoined the company. Frodo watched his progress affectionately. "They'll make a song of it some day" he said patting the old wizard on the back of the knee as he resumed his place at the back of the company.

"Now" He went on, bringing his attention back to Hob Hayward and the rest of the Hobbits who had witnessed the breaking of the bridge in fascinated horror, "We're pretty tired. I hope you don't mind a little company for the evening." As he spoke, he pushed through the crowd and passed through the door of the smaller building that housed the Hobbit gatewardens.

As he entered, he clapped his arms to his shoulders with a mock shiver. "Brrrr. You know, fire has other uses besides making a fireplace look quaint," he complained as his companions and some of the other Hobbits followed him into the building. "Pippin, be a good lad and throw some more wood on that fire."

As Pippin moved to fulfill Frodo's request, Hob spoke up again. "We're not allowed to use more than our allotment of firewood. It's against the rules." Pippin froze for a brief instant, a look of terror passing briefly across his features. Quickly he remembered himself, and continued the task of building up the fire.

"Hmmm. I can see how that would be a problem." Said Frodo earnestly. "But I think I have a solution that we can all feel comfortable with." As he spoke, he snatched a burning oil lamp off of its hook on the wall and walked purposefully back out the front door. Without hesitating, he hurled the lamp at the side of the large building across the road that had housed Bill Ferny.

Immediately, a gout of flame shot up the side of the building and curled around the soffit. As several of the Hobbits came out of the building behind him and looked on in fascinated horror, Frodo stepped across the road, closer to the burning structure and began warming his hands. "Ahhhh," he sighed. "That's more like it. Nothing like a little bonfire to warm a Hobbit's toes eh?"

The Hobbits simply gaped as he went on, "That's what I call killing two birds with one stone. Not only do I get warm, now there is also one less building that needs firewood. We can use their portion tonight."

Within minutes the large guardhouse was engulfed in flame and Frodo continued to warm his hands. The heat could be felt all the way across the road. The watching Hobbits muttered softly among themselves, and one of them quietly detached himself from the crowd and disappeared up the road. Frodo, standing as if hypnotized by the flames, seemed not to notice.

Suddenly, he roused himself and turned to face the crowd. "So what's a thirsty Hobbit got to do to get some ale around here?"

The watching Hobbits exchanged sheepish glances with each other. "Welllll," said one of the younger one, "the Chief don't hold with drinkin' 'cept for the big folk, and they goes around 'collectin' what ale we has...but" he added hastily as his words were met with a look of impatience, "On the other hand, the big folk they send around to do the 'collectin' are about as smart as a mountain troll."

Several of the Hobbits tried to shush him, but he would have none of it. "Well it's true! I'm sick and tired of 'the Chief this' and 'the chief that.' I say it's about time we said 'nuts' to the Chief and his ugly big folk."

"That's the kind of talk I like to hear," said Frodo quickly warming to the young Hobbit. "If more of you'd talk like that, this Chief of yours would have to find someplace else to go be chief of." He looked around at the rest of the Hobbits. "Well, don't just stand there. Any of you that have a bit of ale put by can just run along and fetch it. The night isn't getting any younger. There's a new Chief in town, and it's time to celebrate."

Several of the Hobbits scurried off in different directions, and began reappearing one by one, with various amounts of ale in tow. As the big guard house went from engulfing flames to smoldering wreckage, the assembled Hobbits and the company of the Ring settled in for a long night of merrymaking such as the Shire had not seen in many a moon.

Gandalf, Elrond, and the other cloaked figure were instructed to stand watch, and were not invited into the celebration, "after all," said Frodo, "as dear as you all are to my heart, in the end you ARE a bunch of big folk. The Hobbits are for the Hobbits."

Inside, Frodo had become the center of attention as Merry and Pippin had quietly blended into the background. After several drinks all around, he sat Hob Hayward down in front of him and began questioning him.

"So Hob. It looks like things have taken a turn for the worse around these parts. What's been going on here while we've been away?" He held Hob's gaze steadily, as if probing the thoughts behind whatever words he could get out of him.

"Well sir," began Hob uncertainly, "you see it's the Chief and his men that has things all turned around. It was already too late once we realized old Lotho had acquired a lot more property around the Shire than was good for him or us."

He looked around at his fellows, hoping for some support, but his focus quickly returned to Frodo, almost as if in response to some outside command. "Go on," said Frodo. "Don't worry about your buddies. We're all in this together aren't we guys?" His stern, slightly reddish gaze swept the room.

He was quickly greeted with a chorus of nods and vocal, if somewhat nervous approbation.

"So Lotho's set himself up as Chief has he?" He prompted.

"Yes sir. He's holed himself up away at Bag End. At first it was just him and a few Hobbits who were getting a little too big for their britches, but then he started bringing in Big Folk to help him with his plans. At first he sent them around to all corners of the Shire, collectin' and redistributin' things. But after awhile it became obvious that there was a lot more collectin' goin' on than redistributin'."

"As our provisions got shorter and shorter, the list of rules got longer and longer," He lamented.

"Well, no harm in that," Frodo interrupted. "I mean what's the point of bein' Chief if you don't have a few rules that need to be followed. Also, running a show like that takes some provisions. I don't reckon he took anything you really needed all that much now did he."

"Welllll," started Hob uncertainly, but quickly added at Frodo's sharp look, "No sir. Of course not. Just food, clothing, and shelter, not to mention bales and bales of pipeweed. Nothing no sturdy Hobbit couldn't do without in a pinch."

"That's the spirit. Only thing wrong with his program that I can see is that he's got the wrong guy leading it, and too many of these Big Folk running around ruinin' things for decent Hobbits" said Frodo, thoughtfully scratching his chin. "Tell you what. How would you all like to work for the NEW chief?"

"Uh. New Chief sir? I didn't hear tell of no..." began Hob, trailing off as Frodo shook his head and clapped his hand to his forehead. It occurred to him that when he came into his own, he'd see to it that the Hobbits schools of the Shire began teaching courses on quick uptaking.

"Oh well," said Frodo in exasperation. "I suppose it's to be expected. Let me rephrase the question. How many of you would like to take the current Chief and wrap his ears around his bum?" he finished.

He was met with a mix of enthusiastic and nervous approval. Even Nob finally seemed to be getting the idea. "It's like this," Frodo continued. "Lotho's a small thinker. I've been told that it's time for Hobbits to rise up from their quiet countryside and shake the counsels of the wise, and I'm right along side that idea."

"Lotho might be satisfied with telling a few other Hobbits how to run their lives, but I'm thinking it's time the rest of the world began seeing things from a Hobbit point of view."

He jumped up from his chair and began pacing back and forth as he spoke, gesturing to the fascinated Hobbits, who seemed to be hanging on his every word. "The 'Little Folk'" they call us, as if being small somehow makes us lesser people. I got so tired of hearing the people out there talk about how they had forgotten about the land of the Halflings."

"Some of them even wondered if we still existed! Well I say it's time we reminded them." He seemed to be becoming more and more agitated as he spoke, and by this time, his audience was held helplessly in thrall, hanging on his every word.

"It's time we showed the world that we're made of sterner stuff than anything they've ever seen! 'Halflings' they call us, as if we were only half as good as them. I'm here to tell you that when I'm in charge, the Halflings forth shall stand!!"

He was quickly working his audience into a frenzy, except for Sam, who had already heard it all before. The audience was on it's feet, cheering every full stop. Sam, on the other hand, finished off a pint of ale at every full stop.

"So who's with me?!" shouted Frodo, his fist pumping the air. Cheers went up that could be heard over the hill and across the water. "That's what I like to hear! So let us celebrate tonight, for tomorrow dawns the beginning of a New Age in Shire reckoning!" He raised his glass and downed the entire thing in one long pull as the cheers continued around him.

And so the Hobbits passed the rest of the night in happy revelry, until one by one, they passed out where they sat, stood, or reclined. By all account, things seemed to be looking up.

Early the next morning, Merry and Pippin were the first ones up and about. Having excused themselves from the previous night's rally they were clearheaded and ready for the first task of the day.

Most of the Hobbits had made it inside before they had passed out the night before, nevertheless, several had not, and Merry and Pippin went from recumbent form to recumbent form, making sure each was still breathing.

As they wandered about, a large company of Hobbits could be seen making its way up the road from the direction of Bywater. As they approached it became apparent that they were dressed in the uniforms of the Shirriffs and there were many more of them than either Merry or Pippin were accustomed to seeing.

Most of the Shirriffs had eyes only for the burned out hulk of the larger guard shack across the road, however two of them, clearly the leader and another, made straight for Merry and Pippin. "What's the meaning of this? Word came from the guard that some Hobbits had crashed the gate after nightfall last night and were causing a ruckus."

Merry and Pippin looked wearily at each other. It was going to be a long day. "Well?!" Demanded the leader. Did you two have anything to do with it? Let's see your identification?"

Just then, Frodo, appeared at the door of the guardhouse. At one time, Merry and Pippin might have been surprised to see that he did not look the least bit groggy. Considering that he had drunk a whole lot more than any of the unconscious Hobbits now strewn about the lawn it was surprising that he was upright at all. But they had grown too used to the new Frodo to be surprised by anything.

"You don't need to see their identification," said Frodo, looking intently at the leader.

A look of confusion spread across the leader's face as he turned to the other Hobbit who had accompanied him and said, "we don't need to see their identification." He didn't sound very sure of himself.

"These aren't the Hobbits you are looking for," intoned Frodo.

"These aren't the Hobbits we're looking for," said the leader sounding slightly more sure of himself.

"Move along," said Frodo.

"Move along," the leader repeated cheerfully now, waving for Merry and Pippin to go about their business.

"I have an idea. Let's all go jump in the river, and have a nice swim," added Frodo.

"I have an idea," said the leader, turning around to face the rest of the Shirriffs." Let's all go jump in the river, and have a nice swim." With that he started stripping off his clothes, and headed for the river, indicating that the rest of the Shirriffs should follow him.

Looks of confusion bounced back and forth across the entire company, but quickly disappeared under Frodo's glare. Off came their Shirriff's uniforms and their Shirriff's caps and into the Brandywine they went, right behind their leader, not once stopping to think about how much Hobbits hate water.

Only a fairly shallow section of river saved quite a lot of Hobbits from drowning that morning.

Taking only a moment to shout after them "when you're done, you can head up to Bag End. We might need a few strong lads," Frodo turned and went back into the guardhouse. He emerged a few minutes later with Sam, Bilbo, and the big folk in tow. "I suppose it's time we went down to meet this 'chief'" he said as Sam got their packs ready.

Struggling under the weight, Sam strapped the heavy sacks back onto the back of their little pony. "Sorry about this Bill. I've tried reasoning with him, but the master don't take no sauce these days."

Bill looked up at him mournfully. He had been carrying more than his fair share of weight ever since he had rejoined the company at Bree. "Best not to wonder what you're carrying lad," Sam said, rubbing his nose. "Part of the master's plan I'll warrant, though he's awfully close these days about what it is he's planning."

Unlike Merry and Pippin, Sam had drunk almost as heavily as Frodo the night before, and it showed on his face, which was suffused with a pale green glow. Nevertheless, he quickly had the lumpy sacks strapped to Bill's back and watched as Frodo began assembling the rest of the company.

Frodo stood looking around appraisingly at the slumbering forms of several Hobbits who still remained strewn about the yard. "Lady." He snapped. "See what you can do for them." Galadriel threw back the hood of her cloak and unstoppered a vial she had taken from

under her mantle. She went from Hobbit to Hobbit, administering a small sip of the precious liquid to each of them.

Quickly they began reviving as she moved inside to administer to the rest of them. One by one, they began to join the company in varying degrees of wooziness. "Not exactly the hair of the dog" said Frodo, smiling affectionately. "But close enough eh lads?" Several Hobbits grimaced.

Finally the company was ready to set out for Bag End. They were now a small troop as the entire gatewarden contingent had joined them with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Frodo walked in the lead with the Merry, Pippin, Sam, and Bilbo directly behind, and Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel, the three "Elf-Ringers" as Frodo liked to call them arrayed around them.

They traveled quickly along the main roads, and their following grew as curious Hobbits began emerging from their houses and asking what was going on. Frodo encouraged this at every opportunity, and was more than happy to explain to them that they were 'Raising the Shire.' By way of elaboration he would add "that's right. Raising the Shire up to its proper place among the nations of Middle-earth."

This was often met with looks of confusion, but sometimes with enthusiasm, and always with eventual agreement. It was not difficult, even for Hobbits whose schools did not yet offer courses in quick uptake, to figure out that the Chief's days had come to an end.

As the company made its way toward Bag End, a murmur began to arise from the ranks. A small company of men was approaching from the East, and as soon as Frodo caught sight of them, he called the company to a halt.

As the men approached, Frodo looked around for a handy bridge, but knew before he started that none were to be found in this area. "Oh well," he said to himself, "guess we're going to have to do this one the hard way."

Their leader, somewhat bolder for having several armed big folk at his side came toward Frodo. "Look you," he snarled. "I don't know what you're tryin to pull, but me and the lads

ain't gonna put up with it see. Tell that rabble to disperse, or we're gonna disperse 'em for you."

Frodo's left eye began to glow as the leader came to a halt some twenty paces in front of him, putting up a hand to signal the rest of his men to stop as well.

Frodo did not immediately answer him. Instead, he stood staring at the men, an amused, almost distracted look on his face. The leader suddenly seemed uncomfortable, his confidence waning as he began shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Finally, just as the silence was getting really uncomfortable, Frodo spoke up. "Sam, do you smell anything? Have they been neglecting the outhouses in these parts while we were gone?"

Sam, who had been somewhat revived by the day's march, seemed to be in fairly good spirits. "Well master, I was thinking that maybe the Chief had a swamp put in nearby to keep Lobelia in, but it seems to me it'd take a swamp a lot more time to get to smelling that bad."

Frodo laughed. "Hey! Good one Sam. Do you spose burlap breeches came back into style while we were away, or did these guys just dress in a hurry this morning?"

"I don't know sir." Said Sam, "Perhaps their mothers were just too busy to wash their stylish clothes this week."

"Hey!" Shouted the leader, his face suddenly flush with fury. "We're talkin' about you getting rid of this crowd, not how we dress." Suddenly he gestured at the nine men behind him and shouted. "Have at 'em men! These runts won't talk to their betters that way."

Frodo turned around to face Galadriel and spoke quickly. "Okay lady. You're on. Just like I taught you." Galadriel sighed, but quickly threw aside her Elven cloak and mantle to reveal quite a lot of supple black, brown, and red leather underneath. Her armor covered enough to maintain family viewability, but exposed bits that any decent armorer would consider much too important not to protect.

With a cry of "yi yi yi yi yi yi!" She leapt forward, doing a triple somersault in the air, and landing with a thigh-high leather boot planted on the chests of each of the first two men in line.

Frodo watched in amusement as Galadriel then proceeded to punch, kick, chop, and throw men around until all ten of her attackers had had quite enough and ran off across the fields, bleeding, limping, and blowing horns as they ran.

Galadriel rejoined the procession and readjusted her mantle and cloak over her armor. There was a fire in her eyes that Frodo had not seen before. Apparently, she had enjoyed herself.

"Heh heh." Chuckled Frodo. "I knew that would come in handy sooner or later."

The company continued down the lane toward Bag End. Soon they came across a brick mill that had apparently been recently built. A figure reclined lazily on the porch. As they approached, the figure rose up from its seat and looked lazily at the company.

"Weeeeell, if it isn't Mad Baggins Junior and friends, all dressed up for fightin'." Frodo could almost feel Sam bristling beside him. He turned to look just in time to see Sam answer.

"Ted Sandyman!" he said, "I reckon you like the way things is goin' around here. Probably asked to have that ugly mill built."

Sandyman spat in the dirt at his feet. "Well. Sam Gamgee isn't it? Seen your Gaffer around anywhere? I heard tell he was enjoyin' his new efficiency hole down the way ever since we tossed him out of his old hole."

Frodo could see the rage in Sam's eyes so he leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"That's the spirit Sammy. You gonna let him talk about your Gaffer that way?"

Sam, who had been keeping his anger in check for weeks, finally found an outlet for his fury. Quickly he advanced on the suddenly less cocky Ted Sandyman. As Sam approached him, Ted fumbled desperately for the horn that hung at his belt, but he was too slow.

Many members of the company looked away so that they would not have to witness the ensuing violence. Frodo watched appreciatively.

Several action filled minutes later, Sam rejoined the company and they continued on their way. "Very impressive Sam, my lad," said Frodo, patting him on the back. "I've never seen underwear stretched quite that far."

Sam grinned and looked back over his shoulder at the figure of Ted Sandyman rolling on the ground, arms pinned to the sides of his head, struggling to escape the hold of his own undergarments. The small horn he had been trying to reach was nowhere to be seen. "My Gaffer taught me that one." He said. "He calls it the Royal Wedgie for the way it leaves a person looking like he's wearing a cotton crown."

"Well done." Said Frodo. "I don't reckon we'll be hearing any more of his lip for awhile. Or that horn for that matter, except maybe when he has beans for dinner."

In a short time, the company was assembling in front of Bag End. The crowd of Hobbits had grown to a couple hundred, and many of them were quite ready to take out the frustrations of the past year on Lotho.

All but Frodo were surprised to find Bag End empty. "It is as I suspected Sam." Lotho wasn't the Chief, but I expect we're about to find out who is.

Just then, a stooped figure emerged from one of the new shacks that stood along the road to Bag End. Recognition immediately dawned on the members of the company of the Ring, even though they had not seen Saruman since shortly after the fall of Isengard.

"Saruman." Said Frodo, laughing. "I had a feeling you were at the bottom of all of this." He shook his head and squatted on the ground, picking at some stones in the road. "I mean the 'no beer' rule was Lotho through and through, but Bill Ferny had Saruman written right across his forehead."

Saruman sneered at the company, and looked from face to face. Recognition suddenly dawned on him. "Gandalf!? Elrond!? Galadriel!? What are you doing here? Gandalf I can

believe, but Elrond and Galadriel? What are you doing so far from your precious Elf Havens?"

Frodo chuckled again. "I guess you hadn't heard. They work for me now. Remember those three Rings for Elven kings?"

Saruman stared at him in blank horror as Frodo continued. "Well, it turns out that with Sauron out of the way, and the One Ring in my possession, they decided that it would be best to aid me in my attempt to drag Middle-earth kicking and screaming into the Fourth Age."

"The Ring..." stammered Saruman. "You have it? I thought it was destroyed! Barad dur fell. Sauron is no more. How is this possible?!"

"It's a long story," answered Frodo. "but it has a happy ending... well... a mostly happy ending anyway, though I don't suppose it will be too happy for you come to think of it." He stood back up slowly, and somehow menacingly. The casual observer would not have noticed anything threatening about his demeanor, yet closer scrutiny would have caused the casual observer to get a funny, tingly sensation up and down the spine that conveyed a very clear message to the brain:

"Run."

Saruman blinked. His mouth worked as if he were struggling to speak, until finally he was able to blurt out, "you could use another wizard you know. You can never have too many wizards. They come in handy, wizards."

Frodo smiled. "Don't think I hadn't thought of that. I'm sure you would have your uses, but considering the way you bungled your last attempt at ruling Middle-earth what makes you think you're qualified to help me do it now?"

"Well I..." began Saruman, "Of course there's..." he fought to control a sudden panic that seemed to have overtaken him. "What about pity and mercy and all of that? I thought Hobbits were gentle creatures."

Frodo smiled gently. "Saruman, Saruman, Saruman," he said. "We may look gentle, but deep down, we're right bastards just like everybody else." With that, he gestured over his shoulder at his personal Ringwraiths. "Guys? What should we do about the wizard who betrayed the entire White Council?"

For a man of his apparent age, Saruman managed to achieve a surprising turn of speed before the first lightning bolt hit him. He barely felt the leather boots as they landed square in the small of his back. He'd have surely been surprised had he been in a position to notice that it was Aiglos, the spear of Gil-galad, that finished him off.

Frodo dusted off his hands. "Pity?" he asked of the cloud that had formed over Saruman's withering body. "It was pity that almost got me killed when Bilbo stayed his hand on Gollum. I'll not be making the same mistake."

A hush fell over the crowd as a breeze blew up from the east and scattered the cloud to the wind. Frodo watched silently until there was nothing left to be seen, then he turned to face an expectant crowd of Hobbits.

"There's much left to do." he said, his left hand clutching the Ring on its chain around his neck. "I reckon there are still some men running around the Shire trying to tell Hobbits what to do. I've got a handful of gold for every man-head you bring here to Bag End."

He then launched into much the same speech he had made the night before at the Gatehouse on the Brandywine. There was much talk of Hobbits rising up and taking their proper place in the world. Once again, he was cheered at every full stop.

Many Hobbits went home that day with only vague memories of anything he had said, but to a man, they were all certain that it made sense at the time. Anyway, it didn't matter. Clearly they had a leader in Frodo Baggins, and they would follow him to the ends of the earth.

As the crowd dispersed, Elrond approached Frodo. "Do you think it wise to put a reward on the heads of men? What if they start going outside the shire for men who weren't even involved in all of this?"

Frodo rolled his eyes at him. "You just aren't getting this are you?" He said in exasperation. "they might have come to you from all over the world for wisdom at one time, but that's not what you are here for now. Just wave Aiglos around when I tell you to, and keep your sermons to yourself okay?"

"Besides," he added "sometimes it's necessary to give up something you love so that others may enjoy it, and I promise I'll get enjoyment out of each and every head that is brought to me, no matter how much it's owner loved it."

A slight tick momentarily twitched across the features of Elrond, but then his face went slack as he answered "yes master," and returned to his place beside Gandalf and Galadriel.

Frodo turned and gestured for his Hobbit friends to follow him into Bag End. The Hobbit Hole was an absolute wreck. Trash was strewn from wall to wall, and there was a lingering smell of death in the air.

Nevertheless, Frodo strode down the front hall and into the living room, where Bilbo's unexpected party had occurred so many years before. "Bilbo," he said. "can you get this place cleaned up some? It's a pit." His tone suggested that it was more than a polite request.

"Sam" he continued. "Get that box that Galadriel gave you, and get my yard fixed up. They've left it in a horrible state."

Sam seemed cheered by this suggestion. "Yes master," he said enthusiastically. "Should I spread some of it around the Shire so that the other Hobbits might benefit from it?"

Frodo thought about this for a minute and replied. "I don't think that will be necessary Sam. If you think about it, we're up on a hill here. If you spread enough around up here, the next time it rains, some of it is bound to wash into the rest of the Shire." He smiled a great big smile. "I like to think of it as the 'trickle down' effect."

Sam hesitated as if to ask another question, but thought better of it and instead turned to go.

"Merry! Pippin!" snapped Frodo. "Get those sacks off of the pony and have my three big friends help you bring them back in here."

As the two younger Hobbits went out to do as they were told, Frodo looked around and spoke to himself. "The first order of business will be to have somebody make me a better chair to sit in. Can't very well rule the world from any of these."

Nevertheless, he positioned one of his small, humble chairs in front of the fireplace and sat in it to await the return of his friends.

Presently, Merry, Pippin, and three stooped figures came back in carrying several heavy bundles.

"Let's get to work," said Frodo rubbing his hands together. "We made some progress on the road, and all three of you have been very helpful in getting the design right and creating the new orbs, but now it's time to put our little plan into effect."

The sacks were upturned on the floor, and several dozen crystalline spheres about the size of a large man's fist rolled in several different directions at once.

"As you know, the idea comes from the Palantiri, but clearly the Palantiri were way too limiting. I mean, who's idea was it to make them the size of bowling balls and then make only seven of them?" The assembled company listened attentively as he went over the plan.

"My idea was to make a palantir that everybody can use. So far we've managed to make 60 of them, but when we set up shop here, I'm hoping we can make that many every week."

"Then we begin distributing them, first around the Shire, then we move to Bree, and from there, the world is our oyster."

Pippin, who had not been let in on the planning sessions on the road, was as curious as always. "But Frodo, how is this going to help you rule the world?"

"Well," said Frodo. "It's simple really. What we do is we insinuate our little globes into the economies of every nation in the Middle-earth. They are such useful tools that soon nobody will be able to do business without them."

"Only we know the secret of their operation. They aren't quite as easy to use as the originals, and they don't work quite as well, but they can be mass produced, and they won't work without the system of magic spells that Gandalf puts on them."

"I still don't understand" Said Pippin.

"Well," said Frodo, not minding explaining again the genius of his plan. "These 'mini-palantiri' if you will, only operate for so long. After about six months, we change the system of magic spells and everybody who owns one has to pay us to be able to use the new 'operating system' of spells. If they don't pay, their devices become useless pieces of crystal."

"Wow." Said Pippin, his mind awash in a vision of a world paying tribute to a single Hobbit just for the privilege of using equipment they have already bought. "That's sheer genius! The Shire will become the richest kingdom in all of Middle-earth!"

"Yes." said Frodo. Before long, every kingdom in Middle-earth, whether Elf, Dwarf, or Man, will bow helpless before us."

"The only problem I see," said Pippin, a puzzled frown on his face, "is the name. I mean, 'mini-Palantiri' just doesn't roll off of the tongue very well does it?"

"No, and you're right." answered Frodo. "I've been giving that a lot of thought, and I think I'll change the name."

"Yes?" said Pippin.

"Yes" said Frodo. "Instead of mini-Palantiri, I think I shall call them 'Windows'."