



Beowulf

Overview



In the early history of England, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Picts, tribes of savage, seafaring people, came from the lands around the North and Baltic Seas and took England from its original inhabitants, the Celts. These people made homes for themselves in the new land and

became known as Anglo-Saxons, but they still clung to many customs and traditions of their old countries. Even after hundreds of years, their bards still sang of old-world heroes.

The best loved of these ancient heroes was Beowulf the Geat. The story of his courage and strength was told and retold for centuries. At last, about 700 A.D., a monk wrote it down just as it was told by the bards. Thus it became the very first piece of written English literature. A tale like Beowulf, which treats of the life of a hero of national importance whose adventures are closely connected with the history of a people, is called an "epic" when told in verse.

The tale that follows is actually incomplete. It is missing Beowulf's battle with the dragon. Check again soon for the final chapter.

The Tale of Beowulf

Long ago lived good old King Hrothgar of the Danes. When he was young, he had been mighty and brave in battle, but now he had become too old to fight. So he said to himself, "I will build

me a great palace, which shall be known the world over. Here all the heroes of the land can come together and feast and tell tales of their glory."

So his palace was built and held together with iron bands as strong as human hand could forge. Then it was all plated with gold and set with jewels and furnished with golden benches and golden dishes and golden goblets. Here he gathered together all the brave men of his kingdom.

They feasted and drank and told tales, and the court bards played their harps and sang of the glories of bygone days.

Now a monster named Grendel and his witch-mother lived in a cave at the bottom of a marshy pool not far from the palace. This Grendel was the only giant upon earth at that time; and he was more horrible than any other giant who ever lived. Every night he could hear the merriment in the palace, the clinking of dishes and goblets, the laughter of the heroes, and the songs of the minstrels. It made him very angry to hear these sounds of happiness and he resolved to put an end to them at once.

One night when the feast was over and the men were all sleeping on the golden benches, Grendel came stamping and snorting up from the marshes to the palace. He seized thirty men and dragged them off to his cave and ate them. Night after night he came and carried off the sleeping men. It was not safe for any man to stay anywhere in the palace after dark. Even though he hid himself in the topmost tower, Grendel always found him out. Soon the palace was always deserted at twilight.

King Hrothgar was very, very sad because he had lost so many of his beloved followers, and because he could no longer use his beautiful hall after nightfall. Although he called councils of the wisest and bravest men in the kingdom, nothing could be done to rid the land of Grendel. Many brave men tried to conquer the monster, but they all failed.

Now news traveled very slowly in those days, so that it was twelve long years before the story of Grendel and the golden palace came across the sea to the land of the Geats. There lived in this land a mighty hero named Beowulf, the strongest man in all the world. Indeed, there was the strength of thirty men in the grip of his hand. As soon as the story of Grendel reached his ears, he decided to go to kill the monster and free old King Hrothgar from fear. He chose fourteen brave companions and set sail across the sea in a curved-prowed¹ ship, which glided over the waters like a swan. At the end of twenty-four hours, they sighted the steep, shining sea-cliffs that marked the shores of Hrothgar's kingdom.

On these cliffs a guard was stationed to see that no enemies entered the land. When he saw the ship draw near laden with armed warriors, the bristling spears standing up like an ash-forest and the gilded boars' heads on their helmets blazing in the sunlight, he rode down to the shore and hailed them.

"Why do you come, mail-covered warriors, over the sea in your high-riding ship? I am stationed here to watch for enemies, but I have never seen enemies dare to come so boldly as you. Indeed, I have never seen a band of braver looking men. There is one among you who seems a true hero. But I must know that you are not treacherous spies before I can let you pass."

Beowulf answered, "I am Beowulf of the Geats. I heard the story of King Hrothgar's troubles with Grendel and I have come to free him from fear."

"That is much easier to say than to do," replied the watchman. "Many brave men have tried to overcome the monster, but none have succeeded. However, since your mission is friendly, I myself will take you to my King."

The watchman left a guard of his own men to care for the ship of the Geats until they should return. Then he set out with them toward the

palace. After a way along a winding path, they suddenly came out upon the top of a hill and saw the golden palace gleaming in the sunshine.

Here the watchman left them, for he had to return to his post by the shore. They went on alone. They stacked their shields and spears against an outside wall and entered. After Beowulf had told his name and errand to a Danish warrior, he was taken to see the King.

"Hail, Hrothgar," said he. "I am Beowulf, nephew of the King of Geatland. In my distant country, I heard how this beautiful building stands empty and useless after the fall of night. I made up my mind to come and help you. All my followers urged me to come, for they know my great strength. They had seen me when I came, bloody but victorious, from my battle with the water-dragons, after I had killed five. I beg your permission to fight Grendel alone. If I am slain, pray send my rich armor back to my own King."

"It is noble of you to seek to help us, Beowulf," answered King Hrothgar. "It pains me to tell of the great sorrow Grendel has caused me. There are few of my followers left, for he has carried off many of the bravest. Often heroes have stayed here after dark to fight Grendel, but the next morning we always found them gone and the benches dripping with blood. No one has ever been able to conquer Grendel; I hope that you will have success."

Then King Hrothgar held a great feast for Beowulf and his companions. All the brave men left in the kingdom were there. The bards played their harps and sang of bold battles of long ago.

Beowulf sat between the King's two sons, and the Queen herself served him drink from a golden goblet.

When darkness came, all the Danes left the palace in the care of Beowulf and his comrades and went to another building for the night, as was their custom. None of those left in the feast-hall expected to be alive the next morning. They knew that Grendel was very angry because they dared to spend the night in the palace, for, since sunset, shadowy shapes had been flitting around them in the dusk. Nevertheless, they lay down on the golden benches and made ready to sleep as best they could. Before lying down, Beowulf stripped off his armor and cast aside his sword.

“I hear that Grendel never fights with weapons, he said. “Therefore, I, too, will use no weapon, but will fight him with my bare hands, for I am as brave in battle as he.”

After all the men but one were sleeping, Grendel came striding up from the marshes. Quickly he tore open the door with his spike-tipped fingers.

His eyes gleamed red with rage in the darkness. He seized the nearest warrior and ate him all, even his fingers and toes. Then he went to take another, but Beowulf reached out and caught him by the arm and squeezed it until his fingers crackled. Grendel cried out, for, pull as hard as he might, he could not get away from the strength of that grip.

Then they grappled together: Beowulf, the strongest of men, and Grendel, the greatest of giants. Back and forth they swayed in their mighty struggle. The golden benches overturned and broke. The whole building rattled and shook and would have fallen if it had been less strongly built. Then many of Beowulf’s followers wished to help him and struck at Grendel with their swords. But Grendel bore a charmed life and could not be harmed with weapons forged by man.

On they struggled. Now Grendel would have run away if he could, but he could not. Then the palace echoed to a new sound, the monster’s terrible cry of pain and defeat, for Beowulf had given him a deadly wound on the shoulder.

Finally, Beowulf gave a mighty wrench. Grendel’s sinews cracked and burst. He ran howling out into the marshes to die, leaving his whole hand and arm in Beowulf’s grasp.

Beowulf nailed the arm and hand with its claws of steel above the door where all might see. The next morning people came from far and near to see the huge footprints of the monster, his hand and arm, and the beautiful feast-hall all torn and twisted from the struggle.

That night King Hrothgar held another feast more splendid than the first, and he richly rewarded Beowulf and his companions with gold and jewels.

To Beowulf alone, he gave six warhorses with jeweled harness, a bright golden helmet, and a sword used by many heroes of bygone days.

Then they feasted and sang and made merry until far into the night, for they were at last free from fear of the monster Grendel.

After the feast, they all settled down to sleep in the palace just as they had done before Grendel had first come. Robes and cushions were spread over the golden benches in the feast-hall and the Danes slept there. Beowulf and his companions went to another room for the night. The Danes lay down without fear, for they knew that Grendel could never trouble them again. They had forgotten that his witch-mother was still alive and would be coming to avenge the death of her son.

In the middle of the night, she crept up from the marshes and stole softly into the palace. All were sleeping soundly. She seized the nearest man and made off with him to her cave. Then there was great sorrow in the palace. The old King grieved most of all, for the missing man was his dearest friend. Beowulf at once offered to go to the cave and fight the witch.

“But,” said he, “if Grendel’s mother should conquer me and I should never come back, always care for my faithful men, King Hrothgar, and send my hard-won gifts to my own King.”

Then the whole company set forth for the pool where the cave was. Even the aged King ordered a horse saddled so that he might go. They rode over a winding path tracked with Grendel’s huge footprints. This led at first by pleasant meadows, then ran over steep, jagged cliffs and through misty fens into a forest of stunted trees with twisted, misshapen limbs. In the midst of this forest, they came upon the pool—a horrid pool bubbling with blood and filled with wriggling snakes, lizards, and sea-dragons. This pool was so deadly that a deer, chased by hounds, would stay on the shore and be killed rather than seek to escape through the poisonous waters. There were many water-dragons stretched out along the banks, but at the coming of the warriors, they all slid back into the pool except one that Beowulf killed with an arrow. Then Beowulf made ready to enter the pool.

He put on his best armor, which was plated with gold and set with precious stones and so strongly wrought that no sword could bite through it.

After bidding farewell to Hrothgar and the warriors, he jumped into the slimy water. He

went down, down, down, for a whole day and night without reaching bottom. Grendel's mother knew from the motion of the waters that some one had entered her pool. She came up and seized him and dragged him off. All along the way, sea-monsters bit through his armor with their long sharp tusks. He could not strike back to defend himself, for he was wrapped tight in the witch's arms.

At last he felt himself come to a place where there were no more swift currents and he knew that he must be in the cave. Looking around, he saw the flashing of strange lights. Then he could more clearly see the witch. He made a great struggle and hit her a heavy blow on the head with the sword that Hrothgar had given him.

Although that sword was as strong as any made by man, it did not even scratch Grendel's mother. She was protected by magic from swords made by men.

Then Beowulf had to trust again to the grip of his hand. He seized her by the shoulder and swung her to the ground; but she, too, was strong. She quickly pulled him down and sat on him. She drew out her battle-knife and struck him, but she could not hurt him because of the strength of his armor. Still, the fight would have turned out very badly for Beowulf, if he had not seen in a corner a magic sword forged by the giants in olden days. It was so large that no ordinary man could lift it. He wrenched himself free, took the sword, and struck the witch so that she fell to the ground dead.

As he started to leave, he noticed the body of Grendel lying against the wall of the cave and decided to cut off the head and take it back to King Hrothgar. As he cut with the giant sword, the blade shriveled and melted away in Grendel's hot, poisonous blood, just as icicles melt in the sunshine. All that was left was the hilt in his hand.

Meanwhile, the warriors on the shore were waiting and waiting for Beowulf's return. Long hours passed and still he did not come. They saw the pool bubbling bloodier than ever and thought he must be dead. The Danes gave up all hope and turned homeward. Only his own faithful men remained. At last he came up dragging the huge head of Grendel. It took four men to carry the head, hung by the hair from a pole.

Old King Hrothgar was overjoyed to see Beowulf again and to hear of his victory. He wanted Beowulf to stay with him and be an adopted son to him, but Beowulf was already longing for his native land. So King Hrothgar held a farewell feast and gave Beowulf all the gold and rare jewels that his ship would carry.

The next day Beowulf loaded his ship with the treasure and sailed back to the land of the Geats. There he was welcomed by all his countrymen. He became a great man in the kingdom. After the death of the King of the Geats, Beowulf was chosen to take his place and he ruled wisely and well.

¹ The prows or bows of ancient vessels always rose from the water in a curve that ended in a figurehead.