

STORIES OF BEOWULF



The warriors fared on over the blue sea.

STORIES OF
BEOWULF

TOLD TO THE CHILDREN BY

H. E. MARSHALL

WITH PICTURES BY

J. R. SKELTON



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TO
EVELYN ISABELLA

ABOUT THIS BOOK

“Beowulf is known to every one.” Some months ago I read these words, and doubted if they were true. Then the thought came to me that I would help to make them true, for Beowulf is a fine story finely told, and it is a pity that there should be any who do not know it. So here it is “told to the children.”

Besides being a fine story, Beowulf is of great interest because it is our earliest epic, that is, the oldest poem in the Anglo-Saxon language which tells of noble deeds in noble words.

In the British Museum there is a little book, worn and brown with age, spoiled by fire and water. Yet it is not so brown and old, it is not so spoiled but that it may still be read by those who know Anglo-Saxon. This book is a thousand years old, and in its worn brown pages it holds the story of Beowulf.

There is something strange and wonderful in the thought that the story which pleased our forefathers a thousand years ago should please us still to-day. But what is more wonderful is that it should be told in such beautiful words that they thrill us with delight and make us feel as if those old days

were fresh and living. In the telling of the story I have tried to keep something of that old-time spirit, and when, later, you come to read the tale in bigger and better books, I hope that you will say that I did not quite fail.

H.E. MARSHALL

Oxford, 1908

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CHAPTER I

HOW GRENDEL THE OGRE WARRED WITH THE DANE FOLK

Long, long ago, there lived in Daneland a king called Hrothgar. The old men of his country loved him and bowed the knee to him gladly, and the young men obeyed him and joyfully did battle for him. For he was a king mighty in war, and valiant. Never foe could stand against him, but he overcame them all, and took from them much spoil.

So this king wrought peace in his land and his riches grew great. In his palace there were heaped gold in rings and in chains, armour finely welded, rich jewels which glowed as soft sunlight.

Then King Hrothgar looked upon this great treasure and brooded thereon. At last he said, "I will build me a great hall. It shall be vast and wide, adorned within and without with gold and ivory, with gems and carved work. The fame of it shall spread over all the earth, and men shall sing of it for all time. And when it is builded, therein shall I call all my warriors, young and old and divide to them the

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treasure that I have. It shall be a hall of joy and feasting.”

Then King Hrothgar called his workmen and gave them commandment to build the hall. So they set to work, and day by day it rose quickly, becoming each day more and more fair, until at length it was finished.

It stood upon a height, vast and stately, and as it was adorned with the horns of deer, King Hrothgar named it Hart Hall.

Then, true to his word and well pleased with the work of his servants, King Hrothgar made a great feast. To it his warriors young and old were called, and he divided his treasure, giving to each rings of gold.

And so in the Hall there was laughter and song and great merriment. Every evening when the shadows fell, and the land grew dark without, the knights and warriors gathered in the Hall to feast. And when the feast was over, and the wine-cup passed around the board, and the great fire roared upon the hearth, and the dancing flames gleamed and flickered, making strange shadows among the gold and carved work of the walls, the minstrel took his harp and sang.

Then from the many-windowed Hall the light glowed cheerfully. Far over the dreary fen and moorland the gleam was shed, and the sound of song and harp awoke the deep silence of the night.

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Within the Hall was light and gladness, but without there was wrath and hate. For far on the moor there lived a wicked giant named Grendel. Hating all joy and brightness, he haunted the fastness and the fen, prowling at night to see what evil he might do.

And now when night by night he heard the minstrel's song, and saw the lighted windows gleam through the darkness, it was pain and grief to him.

Very terrible was this ogre Grendel to look upon. Thick black hair hung about his face, and his teeth were long and sharp, like the tusks of an animal. His huge body and great hairy arms had the strength of ten men. He wore no armour, for his skin was tougher than any coat of mail that man or giant might weld. His nails were like steel and sharper than daggers, and by his side there hung a great pouch in which he carried off those whom he was ready to devour.

Now day by day this fearsome giant was tortured more and more, for to him it was a torture to hear the sounds of laughter and of merriment. Day by day the music of harp and song of minstrel made him more and more mad with jealous hate.

At length he could bear it no longer. Therefore one night he set out, and creeping through the darkness came to Hart Hall, where, after the feast and song were done, the warriors slept.

Peacefully they slept with arms and armour thrown aside, having no fear of any foe. And so with ease the fierce and savage giant seized them with his

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Terrible was this ogre Grendel to look upon.

greedy claws. Speedily he slew thirty of the bravest warriors. Then howling with wicked joy he carried them off to his dark dwelling, there to devour them.

Oh, when morning came, great was the moaning in Daneland. When the sun arose and shone upon the desolated Hall, and the war-craft of Grendel was made plain, there was weeping. A cry of woe and wailing crept out over the moorland, and

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the woesome sound made glad the heart of the Wicked One.

But Hrothgar, the mighty, sat upon his throne downcast and sorrowful. He who was strong in war wept now for the woe of his thanes.

With eyes dimmed and dark, in grief and rage he looked across the wild wide moorland, where the track of the monster was marked with blood, and he longed for a champion.

But who could fight against an Ogre? Before the thought the bravest quailed. Such a fight would be too loathly, too horrible. It was not to be endured.

When night fell the sorrowing warriors laid themselves down to rest with sighs and tears, in the bright hall that once had rung with songs and laughter. But the greedy monster was not yet satisfied, his work was not yet done. Stealthily through the darkening moorland again the Ogre crept until he reached the Hart Hall.

Again he stretched forth his hand, again he seized the bravest of the warriors, slew and carried them off to his drear dwelling.

Then was there wailing and fierce sorrow among the mighty men. Yet was there none so brave that he would face and fight the demon foe. But each man swore that he would not again sleep beneath the roof of Hart Hall. So when evening fell, they departed every man to the dwellings around the palace, and the fair Hall was left desolate.

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Thus Grendel, single handed, warred against the Dane folk until the great Hall, the wonder of men, was forsaken and empty.

For twelve long years it stood thus, no man daring, except in the light of day, to enter it. For after the shadows of evening fell, Grendel was master there. And in that stately Hall, when night was darkest, he held his horrid feasts. Only near to the throne, the carved Gift-seat or throne of the Dane folk, where Hrothgar the king used to sit, and from whence he dispensed gifts to his people, there only he dared not go. Something sacred and pure was there, before which the wicked Ogre trembled.

Thus for twelve long years Grendel warred against Hrothgar and the Dane folk. He prowled through the misty moorland, lay in wait in dark places, slaying young and old. Many were the grisly deeds he did, many the foul crimes. And the mighty warriors, strong of heart against a mortal foe, were powerless against him.

Downcast and sorrowful of heart Hrothgar sat among his counsellors. None among them knew how to give him advice or comfort. None knew how to deliver his land from the Evil One.

Then the minstrels made mournful songs, and far and wide they sang of how Grendel ever warred with Hrothgar. They sang of how year by year there was battle and wrath between the noble King and the Ogre of evil fame.

CHAPTER II

HOW BEOWULF THE GOTH CAME TO DANELAND

And now it came to pass that, across the sea in far Gothland, the songs of Grendel and his wrath were sung, until to Beowulf the Goth the tale of woe was carried. And Beowulf, when he heard of Grendel's deeds, cried that he would go across the waves to Hrothgar, the brave king, since he had need of men to help him.

Now Beowulf was very strong in war, mighty among men. Of all the nobles of the Goths there was none so great as he. Much beloved, too, was he of Hygelac, King of the Goths, for they were kinsmen and good comrades. And because of the love they bore him, many prayed him to bide peacefully at home, but others, knowing his prowess, bade him go forth.

Beowulf was eager for the contest, so taking with him fifteen warriors and good comrades, he stepped into a ship and bade the captain set sail for Daneland.

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Then like a bird wind-driven upon the waves, the foam-necked ship sped forth. For two days the warriors fared on over the blue sea, until they came again to Daneland and anchored beneath the steep mountains of that far shore.

There, lightly springing to shore, the warriors gave thanks to the sea-god that the voyage had been so short and easy for them.

But upon the heights above them stood the warden of the shore. His duty it was to guard the sea-cliffs and mark well that no foe landed unaware. Now as the warriors sprang to shore, he saw the sun gleam upon sword and shield and coat of mail.

“What manner of men be these?” he asked himself. And mounting upon his horse he rode towards them.

Waving his huge spear aloft, he cried, as he rode onward, “What men be ye who come thus clad in mail-coats, thus armed with sword and spear? Whence cometh this proud vessel over the waves? Long have I kept watch and ward upon this shore that no foe might come unaware to Daneland, yet never have I seen shield-bearing men come openly as ye. And never have I seen more noble warrior than he who seems your leader. Nay, such splendour of armour, such beauty and grace have I not seen. But, strangers, travellers from the sea, I must know whence ye come ere ye go further. Ye may not pass else, lest ye be spies and enemies to Daneland. It were well that ye told me speedily.”

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Then Beowulf answered him, "We are folk of the Goths, thanes of King Hygelac. In friendly guise we come to seek thy lord, King Hrothgar, the mighty chieftain. We have a goodly message to the famed lord of the Danes. There is no cause to be secret. Thou knowest if it be true or no, but we indeed have heard that among ye Danes there is a great and wily foe, a loather of valour, who prowleth terribly in dark nights, making great slaughter and causing much woe. Therefore have I come, for perchance I may be of succour to the noble King Hrothgar in his need."

Fearless and bold, facing the band of warlike men, the warden sat upon his horse, and when Beowulf had ceased speaking, he answered him.

"Ye come as friends, O bearers of weapons, O wearers of war garments. Follow me then, and I will lead you on. I will also give commandment to my men that they guard your ship where it lies by the shore until ye come again."

So following the warden they marched forward. Eager they were for battle, eager to see the far-famed Hart Hall. And as they marched, their gold-decked helmets, their steel mail-coats, their jewelled sword-hilts, flashed in the sunlight, and the clank and clash of weapons and armour filled the air.

On and on they pressed quickly, until the warden drew rein. "There," he said, pointing onward, "there lies the great Hart Hall. No longer have ye need of me. The way ye cannot miss. As for

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me, I will back to the sea to keep watch against a coming foe.”

Then wheeling his horse he galloped swiftly away, while the Goths marched onward until they reached the Hart Hall. There, weary of the long way that they had come, they laid down their shields, and leaning their spears against the walls, sat upon the bench before the great door.

And as they sat there resting, there came to them a proud warrior. “Whence come ye with these great shields,” he asked, “whence with these grey shirts of mail, these jewelled helmets and mighty spears? I am Hrothgar’s messenger and servant, I who ask. Never saw I prouder strangers, never more seemly men. I ween it is not from some foe ye flee in fear and trouble. Rather in pride and daring it would seem ye come to visit Hrothgar.”

Then answered Beowulf. “My name is Beowulf, and we are Hygelac’s thanes. To thy lord, the mighty Hrothgar, we will tell our errand if he will deign that we do greet him.”

The warrior bowed low, for well he saw that Beowulf was a mighty prince.

“I will ask my lord the King,” he said, “if so be thou mayest come to him. And to thee right quickly will I bear his answer.”

So saying he departed, and came to Hrothgar where he sat amongst his earls. The king was now old and grey-haired, and sat amid his wise men

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bowed with grief, for there was none among them mighty enough to free his land from the Ogre.

“My lord,” the warrior said, and knelt before the king, “from far beyond the sea strange knights are come. They pray that they may speak with thee. These sons of battle name their leader Beowulf. Refuse them not, O king, but give them kindly answer. For by the splendour of their arms I deem them worthy of much honour. The prince who sendeth such warriors hither must be great indeed.”

“Beowulf!” cried Hrothgar. “I knew him when he was yet a lad. His father and his mother have I known. Truly he hath sought a friend. And I have heard of him that he is much renowned in war, and that he hath the strength of thirty men in the grip of his hand. I pray Heaven he hath been sent to free us from the horror of Grendel. Haste thee, bid him enter, bid them all to come. I would see the whole friendly band together. Say to them that they are right welcome to the land of Danes.”

The warrior bowed low. Then once more going to the door of the Hall, he stood before Beowulf and his knights.

“My lord,” he said, “the king biddeth me to say to thee that he knoweth already of thy rank and fame. He saith to you brave-hearted men from over the sea that ye are all welcome to him. Now may ye go in to speak with him, wearing your war trappings and with your helmets upon your heads. But leave your shields, your spears, and deadly swords without here, until the talk be done.”

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Then Beowulf and his warriors rose. Some went with him to the Hall, others stayed without to guard the shields and weapons.

Guided by the Danish warrior the knights marched right through the great Hart Hall, until they stood before the Gift-seat where sat the aged king.

“Hail to thee, Hrothgar,” cried Beowulf. “I am Hygelac’s friend and kinsman. Many fair deeds have I done though yet I be young. And to me in far Gothland the tales of Grendel’s grim warfare were told. Sea-faring men told that the great Hall so fair and well-built doth stand forsaken and empty as soon as the shades of evening fall, because of the prowlings of that fell giant.

“Then as we heard such tales did my friends urge me to come to thee because they knew my might. They had themselves seen how I laid low my foes. Five monsters I bound, thus humbling a giant brood. Sea-monsters I slew in the waves at night-time. Many a wrong have I avenged, fiercely grinding the oppressors.

“And now will I fight against Grendel. Alone against the Ogre will I wage war. Therefore one boon I crave of thee, noble prince. Refuse it not, for thereto am I come from very far. I pray thee that I alone, having with me only mine own earls and comrades, may cleanse Hart Hall.

“It hath been told to me that Grendel recketh not of weapons, for his hide is as of steel armour. Therefore will I bear neither sword nor shield. But I will grapple with the fiend with mine hands alone,

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and foe to foe we will fight for victory. And, unto whomsoever it seemeth good to the Lord of Life, unto him shall the victory be given.

“If Grendel win, then will he fearlessly devour the people of the Goths my dear comrades, my noble earls, even as aforetime he hath devoured thy warriors. Then wilt thou not need to cover me with a mound, for the lone moor will be my burial-place. Where ye track the footsteps of the Ogre stained with gore, there will he with greed devour my thanes and me.

“But if I die, then send back to Hygelac my coat of mail, for in all the world there is no other like to it. This is all I ask.”

Beowulf was silent, and Hrothgar the aged king answered him.

“O friend Beowulf,” he said, “thou hast sought us out to help us. Yet to me it is pain and sorrow to tell to any man what shame, what sudden mischiefs, Grendel in his wrath hath done to me. See! my palace-troop, my war-band hath grown small. Grendel hath done this. In his prowlings he hath carried off my men so that my warriors are few.

“Full oft when the wine was red in the cup my knights did swear that they would await the coming of Grendel, to meet him with sword-thrust. So when night fell they abode in the Hall. But in the morning, when day dawned, my fair house was red with blood. And I needs must mourn the death of yet more gallant knights, must have fewer thanes to own my rule.

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“But sit now to the feast and eat with gladness, sure that victory will come to thee.”

So the Goths sat them down in the great Hart Hall and feasted with the Dane folk. The mead cup was carried round, the minstrel sang of deeds of love and battle, and there was great joy and laughter in all the Hall.

CHAPTER III

BEOWULF TELLETH HOW HE WARRED WITH THE SEA-FOLK

Now among all the joyous company who feasted and made merry in the Hart Hall there was one who bore a gloomy face and angry heart. This was a knight named Hunferth. At Hrothgar's feet he sat in jealous wrath, for he could not bear that any knight in all the world should have greater fame than he himself. The praise of Beowulf was bitterness to him, and thus he spake in scoffing words:

“Art thou that Beowulf who didst contend with Breca on the wide sea in a swimming match? Art thou he who with Breca, out of vain pride swam through the sea, and for foolhardiness ventured your lives in deep waters? No man, 'twas said, nor friend nor foe could turn ye from the foolish play. 'Twas winter-time and the waves dashed with loud fury. Yet for a week ye twain strove upon the waters.

“He overcame thee in swimming, he had more strength. Then at morning-time the sea drave him to shore. Thence he departed to his own land where he owned a nation, a town, and much wealth.

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Yea, in that contest thou hadst not the better. Now although thou art so splendid in war, I expect a worse defeat for thee, if thou darest to abide here the coming of Grendel.”

“Friend Hunferth,” said Beowulf quietly, “thou hast spoken much of Breca and of our contest. Now will I tell thee the truth of the matter. Rightly I claim to have the greatest strength upon the sea, more skill than any man upon the waves.

“Breca and I when we were boys talked much thereon, and swore that when we were grown to men we should venture our lives upon the sea. And even so we did.

“As we swam forth into the waves, our naked swords we held in hand. That was right needful to defend us against the whale-fishes.

“Breca was not fleeter than I upon the waves. Strive as he might, he could not flee from me. And so for five nights upon the sea we swam. Then a great storm arose and drave us asunder. Fierce and cold were the waves, dark and terrible the night. The north wind drave upon us till the ocean boiled in madness of wrath.

“Then too the anger of the sea-monsters arose. Glad was I then that my shirt of mail, gold adorned and trusty, wrapped my body. For a spotted monster seized me fast in his grim grip and dragged me to the floor of the sea. But I strove with him and my bright blade was dyed in the blood of the sea-brute.

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“So I escaped me that time. Yet, although one was slain, around me swarmed many another fearful foe. But my dear sword served me well. They did not have joy of their feast, the Evil-doers! They did not sit around on the floor of the sea to swallow me down. Nay rather, in the morning, put to sleep with the sword, they lay among the sea-weeds on the shore, cast up by the waves. And never since upon the great waters have they troubled the sailors.

“Yea, in that contest I slew nine sea-brutes. Never have I heard of a fiercer fight by night under the arch of heaven. Never have I heard of a man more wretched upon the waves. Yet I escaped. And when the sun at morning rose above the sea, the waves cast me upon the shore of Finland, spent and weary of my journey.

“I have never heard it said that thou, Hunferth, didst make such play of sword, no nor Breca, nor any of you. Ye have not done such deeds. But in sooth I would not boast myself. Yet I say unto thee, Hunferth, that Grendel, the evil monster, had never done so many horrors against thy king, that he had never brought such shame upon this fair Hall, hadst thou been so battle-fierce as thou vauntest that thou art. Yea, he hath seen that he hath no need to fear the boasted courage of the Dane folk. So he warreth, and slayeth, and feasteth as he pleaseth. He looketh not for battle at the hands of the Danes. But I, a Goth, shall offer him war, war fierce and long. And after that, he who will may go proudly to Hart Hall.”

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When Beowulf had ceased speaking there was a cry from all the thanes and earls. The Hall rang with the sound of clashing armour and loud shouts as the Dane folk cheered the hero.

But Hunferth abashed held his peace.

Then forth from the bower came Wealthew, Hrothgar's queen. Stately and tall, and very beautiful she came, clothed in rich garments girdled with gold. A golden crown was upon her head, and jewels glittered upon her neck. In her hand she held a great golden cup set with gems. First to King Hrothgar she went and gave to him the beaker.

"Hail to thee," she cried, "mayest thou have joy of the drinking, joy of the feast, ever dear to thy people."

And Hrothgar drank, merry of heart, glad with thoughts of the morrow.

Then through all the Hall Wealthew moved, speaking gracious words, giving to each warrior, young and old, wine from the golden cup. At last she, the crowned queen, courteous and beautiful, came to Beowulf.

Graciously Wealthew smiled upon the Goth lord, holding the beaker to him.

"I thank the Lord of All, that thou art come to us," she said. "Thou art come, noble earl, to bring us comfort, and to deliver us out of our sorrows."

The fierce warrior bowed before the beautiful queen, as he held the wine-cup. He felt the joy of battle rise within him, and aloud he spake:

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Giving to each warrior, young and old, wine from the golden cup

“I swear it when I did set out upon the deep sea, as I stood by my comrades upon the ship. I swear that I alone would do the deed or go down to death in the grip of the monster. As an earl I must fulfil my word, or here in the Hart Hall must I await my death-day.”

The queen was well pleased with the proud words of the Goth lord. And so in splendour and

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high state she moved through the Hall till she came again to the Gift-seat, and there beside the king she sat.

Then again in the Hall there was sound of laughter and merriment. The minstrels sang, and the earls told of mighty deeds until the evening shadows slanted along the wall. Then all arose. The sound of song and laughter was stilled. It was time to be gone.

Farewells were said. Man greeted man, not knowing what the morning might bring forth. But all knew that battle was making ready for those who waited in that great Hall. When the sun had gone down, and dark night covered all the land, ghostly creatures would creep forth to war in the shadow.

So with grave words Hrothgar bade Beowulf farewell.

“Good luck bide with thee,” he said. “Into thy keeping I give the Hall of the Dane folk. Never before did I commit it to any man. Keep it now right bravely. Remember thy fame, show thy great valour, and watch against the Evil-doer. If thou overcome him, there is no desire of thine that shall be unfulfilled, so that it lieth in my power to give it thee.”

Then Hrothgar and his band of warriors and thanes went forth from the Hall, and Beowulf with his comrades was left to guard it.

The beds were spread around the walls, and Beowulf prepared himself strangely for battle. His coat of mail, firmly wrought with shining rings of

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steel, he cast aside. He took his helmet from his head, and with his sword and shield, and all his glittering war-harness, gave it to the keeping of a servant.

And thus all unarmed, clad only in his silken coat, he proudly spake:

“In war-craft I deem I am no worse than Grendel. Therefore not with the sword shall I put him to sleep, though that were easy. Not thus shall I take his life, for he is not learned in the use of war-weapons. So without them we twain this night shall fight. And God the all-wise shall give victory even as it shall seem best to Him.”

Having so spoken Beowulf laid his head upon his pillow and all around him his warriors lay down to take their rest. None among them thought ever again to see his own land. For they had heard of the terrible death that had carried off so many of the Dane folk from Hart Hall. Little they thought to escape that death. Yet so reckless were they of life that soon they slept. They who were there to guard that high Hall slept—all save one.

Beowulf alone, watchful and waiting for the foe, impatiently longed for the coming battle.