

At their heads they placed their polished timber battle-shields; and on the bench over them, each man's kit was kept to hand: a towering war-helmet, webbed mail-shirt and great-shafted spear. It was their habit always and everywhere to be ready for action, at home or in the camp, in whatever case and at whatever time the need arose to rally round their lord. They were a right people.

Another threat is lurking in the night.

They went to sleep. And one paid dearly for his night's ease, as had happened to them often, ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall, committing evil until the end came, death after his crimes. Then it became clear, obvious to everyone once the fight was over, that an avenger lurked and was still alive, grimly biding time. Grendel's mother, monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs. She had been forced down into fearful waters, the cold depths, after Cain had killed his father's son, felled his own brother with a sword. Branded an outlaw, marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds, shunned company and joy. And from Cain there sprang misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel, the banished and accursed, due to come to grips with that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle. The monster wrenched and wrestled with him but Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength, the wondrous gifts God had showered on him: he relied for help on the Lord of All, on His care and favour. So he overcame the foe, brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed, outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind made for his death-den. But now his mother

had sallied forth on a savage journey, grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.

Grendel's mother attacks.

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall, Danes lay asleep, ears who would soon endure a great reversal, once Grendel's mother attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less only by as much as an amazon warrior's strength is less than an armed man's when the hefted sword, its hammered edge and gleaming blade slathered in blood, razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet. Then in the hall, hard-honed swords were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets or woven mail when they woke in terror.

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out, in mortal terror the moment she was found. She had pounced and taken one of the retainers in a tight hold, then headed for the fen. To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved of the friends he trusted between the two seas. She had done away with a great warrior, ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.

Earlier, after the award of the treasure, the Geat had been given another lodging.

There was uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy, Grendel's bloodied arm. It was a fresh blow to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard, both parties having to pay with the lives of friends. And the old lord, the grey-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary when he heard the news: his highest placed adviser, his dearest companion, was dead and gone.

[1278-309]

[1243-77]

Beowulf is summoned.

Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber: the winner of fights, the arch-warrior, came first-footing in with his fellow troops to where the king in his wisdom waited, still wondering whether Almighty God would ever turn the tide of his misfortunes. So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance and the wooden floor-boards banged and rang as he advanced, hurrying to address the prince of the Ingwines, asking if he'd rested, since the urgent summons had come as a surprise.

Hrothgar laments the death of his counsellor. He knows Grendel's mother must avenge her son.

Then Hrothgar, the Shieldings' helmet, spoke: 'Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned. Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.

He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother and a soul-mate to me, a true mentor, my right-hand man when the ranks clashed and our boar-crests had to take a battering in the line of action. Aeschere was everything the world admires in a wise man and a friend. Then this roaming killer came in a fury and slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding, glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape, I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud because of last night, when you killed Grendel, wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat since for too long he had terrorized us with his depredations. He died in battle, paid with his life; and now this powerful other one arrives, this force for evil driven to avenge her kinsman's death. Or so it seems to thanes in their grief, in the anguish every thane endures at the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand that bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.

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[1310-44]

'I have heard it said by my people in hall, counsellors who live in the upland country, that they have seen two such creatures prowling the moors, huge marauders from some other world. One of these things, as far as anyone can ever discern, looks like a woman; the other, warped in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale bigger than any man, an unnatural birth called Grendel by the country people in former days. They are fatherless creatures, and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart among wolves on the hills, on windswept crags and treacherous keshes, where cold streams pour down the mountain and disappear under mist and moorland.

A few miles from here a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch above a mere; the overhanging bank is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface. At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns. And the mere-bottom has never been sounded by the sons of men. On its bank, the heather-stepper halts: the hart in flight from pursuing hounds will turn to face them with firm-set horns and die in the wood rather than dive beneath its surface. That is no good place. When wind blows up and stormy weather makes clouds scud and the skies weep, out of its depths a dirty surge is pitched towards the heavens. Now help depends again on you and on you alone. The gap of danger where the demon waits is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare.

The haunted mere.

The country people's tales about the monsters.

[1345-79]

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I will compensate you for settling the feud
as I did the last time with lavish wealth,
coffers of coiled gold, if you come back.'

Beowulf bolsters
Hrothgar's courage.
He proclaims the
heroic code that
guides their lives.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
'Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark.
So arise, my lord, and let us immediately
set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.
I guarantee you: she will not get away,
not to dens under ground nor upland groves
nor the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to.
Endure your troubles today. Bear up
and be the man I expect you to be.'

The expedition to
the mere.

With that the old lord sprang to his feet
and praised God for Beowulf's pledge.
Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse
with the plaited mane. The wise king mounted
the royal saddle and rode out in style
with a force of shield-bearers. The forest paths
were marked all over with the monster's tracks,
her trail on the ground wherever she had gone
across dark moorland, dragging away
the body of that thane, Hrothgar's best
counsellor and overseer of the country.
So the noble prince proceeded undismayed
up fells and scree, along narrow footpaths
and ways where they were forced into single file,
ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.
He went in front with a few men,
good judges of the lie of the land,

and suddenly discovered the dismal wood,
mountain trees growing out at an angle
above grey stones: the bloodshot water
surged underneath. It was a sore blow
to all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,
a hurt to each and every one
of that noble company when they came upon
Aeschere's head at the foot of the cliff.

Everybody gazed as the hot gore
kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn
repeated its notes: the whole party
sat down to watch. The water was infested
with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons
and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
serpents and wild things such as those that often
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road
and doom the voyage. Down they plunged,
lashing in anger at the loud call
of the battle-bugle. An arrow from the bow
of the Geat chief got one of them
as he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft
stuck deep in his flank and his freedom in the water
got less and less. It was his last swim.
He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,
prodded by barbed boar-spears,
cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank,
a strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch
men gazed at in awe.

Beowulf arms for
the underwater
fight.

Beowulf got ready,
donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;
his mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail
would soon meet with the menace under water.
It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:
no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,
no vicious armlock choke his life out.

To guard his head he had a glittering helmet that was due to be muddied on the mere-bottom and blurred in the upswirl. It was of beaten gold, princely headgear hooped and hasped by a weapon-smith who had worked wonders in days gone by and embellished it with boar-shapes; since then it had resisted every sword. And another item lent by Unferth at that moment of need was of no small importance: the brehon handed him a hilted weapon, a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting. The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns had been tempered in blood. It had never failed the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle, anyone who had fought and faced the worst in the gap of danger. This was not the first time it had been called to perform heroic feats.

When he lent that blade to the better swordsman, Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaef, could hardly have remembered the ranting speech he had made in his cups. He was not man enough to face the turmoil of a fight under water and the risk to his life. So there he lost fame and repute. It was different for the other rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Beowulf takes his leave.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
‘Wiseest of kings, now that I have come to the point of action, I ask you to recall what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall and suffer death while serving your cause, would act like a father to me afterwards. If this combat kills me, take care of my young company, my comrades in arms.

And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar, to send Hygelac the treasures I received. Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold, let Hrethel's son take note of it and see that I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence and enjoyed the good of his generosity. And Unferth is to have what I inherited: to that far-famed man I bequeath my own sharp-honed, wave-sheened wonderblade. With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die.’

After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly: without more ado, he dived into the heaving depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day before he could see the solid bottom.

Quickly the one who haunted those waters, who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds for a hundred seasons, sensed a human observing her outlandish lair from above. So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him in her brutal grip; but his body, for all that, remained unscathed: the mesh of the chain-mail saved him on the outside. Her savage talons failed to rip the web of his war-shirt.

Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish swimmer carried the ring-mailed prince to her court so that for all his courage he could never use the weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole and yet the water did not work against him because the hall-roofing held off

Beowulf is captured by Grendel's mother.

the force of the current; then he saw firelight, a gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell, the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength, then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm: the decorated blade came down ringing and singing on her head. But he soon found his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade refused to bite. It spared her and failed the man in his need. It had gone through many a hand-to-hand fight, had hewed the armour and helmets of the doomed, but here at last the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.

His sword fails to do damage.

Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about his name and fame: he never lost heart.

Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away. The keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely on the might of his arm. So must a man do who intends to gain enduring glory

in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.

Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder and laid about him in a battle frenzy:

he pitched his killer opponent to the floor but she rose quickly and retaliated, grappled him tightly in her grim embrace.

The sure-footed fighter felt suddenly daunted, the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.

So she pounced upon him and pulled out a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life, turned the edge and tip of the blade.

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[1516-49]

The son of Ecgtheow would surely have perished and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth had the strong links and locks of his war-gear not helped to save him: holy God decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord, the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance once Beowulf got back on his feet.

Then he saw a blade that boded well, a sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon, one that any warrior would envy, but so huge and heavy of itself only Beowulf could wield it in battle.

So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged, took a firm hold of the hilt and swung the blade in an arc, a resolute blow that bit deep into her neck-bone and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.

The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated.

A light appeared and the place brightened the way the sky does when heaven's candle is shining clearly. He inspected the vault:

with sword held high, its hilt raised

to guard and threaten, Hygelac's thane

scouted along the wall in Grendel's wake.

Now the weapon was to prove its worth.

The warrior determined to take revenge

for every gross act Grendel had committed –

and not only for that one occasion

when he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops,

fifteen of Hrothgar's house-guards

surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured,

and as many again carried away,

He proceeds to behold Grendel's corpse.

Beowulf discovers a mighty sword and slays his opponent.

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[1550-83]

a brutal plunder. Beowulf in his fury
now settled that score: he saw the monster
in his resting-place, war-weary and wrecked,
a lifeless corpse, a casualty
of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped
at the stroke dealt to it after death:
Beowulf cut the corpse's head off.

Forebodings of
those on the shore.

Immediately the counsellors keeping a lookout
with Hrothgar, watching the lake water,
saw a heave-up and surge of waves
and blood in the backwash. They bowed grey heads,
spoke in their sage, experienced way
about the good warrior, how they never again
expected to see that prince returning
in triumph to their king. It was clear to many
that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

The ninth hour of the day arrived.
The brave Shieldings abandoned the cliff-top
and the king went home; but sick at heart,
staring at the mere, the strangers held on.
They wished, without hope, to behold their lord,
Beowulf himself.

The sword-blade
melts.

Meanwhile, the sword
began to wilt into gory icicles,
to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,
the way it all melted as ice melts
when the Father eases the fetters off the frost
and unravels the water-ropes, He who wields power
over time and tide: he is the true Lord.

Beowulf returns
with the sword's
hilt and Grendel's
head.

The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance
but carried no spoils from those quarters
except for the head and the inlaid sword-hilt
embossed with jewels; its blade had melted

and the scrollwork on it burnt, so scalding was the blood
of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.
Then away he swam, the one who had survived
the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.
The wide water, the waves and pools,
were no longer infested once the wandering fiend
let go of her life and this unreliable world.

The seafarers' leader made for land,
resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,
the mighty load he was lugging to the surface.
His thanes advanced in a troop to meet him,
thanking God and taking great delight
in seeing their prince back safe and sound.
Quickly the hero's helmet and mail-shirt
were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled,
clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.

With high hearts they headed away
along footpaths and trails through the fields,
roads that they knew, each of them wrestling
with the head they were carrying from the lakeside cliff,
men kingly in their courage and capable
of difficult work. It was a task for four
to hoist Grendel's head on a spear
and bear it under strain to the bright hall.
But soon enough they neared the place,
fourteen Geats in fine fettle,
striding across the outlying ground
in a delighted throng around their leader.

He displays the
head in Heorot.

In he came then, the thanes' commander,
the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
his courage was proven, his glory was secure.
Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,
dragged across the floor where the people were drinking,
a horror for both queen and company to behold.