

And trust their neighbors, protect their lord,
Are loyal followers who would fight as joyfully
They drink. May your heart help you do
returned to her seat. The soldiers
like kings. The savage fate
Decreed them hung dark and terrible, what would follow
After night when Hrothgar went from the hall,
Sought his sword left his side
To theirs. Herod and his
Of men, that night men meant to do.
They stacked away their spears, spread out
Blankets and pillows for beer-drinking sleepers
Lay down with their heads.
They slept with their shining swords at the edge
Of their pillows. The hall was filled with helmets
Hanging motionless heads; spears
Stood on their hands, their hammered mail shirts
Covered their chests. It was the Danes' custom
To be ready for war, wherever they rested,
At home or in foreign lands, at their lord's
Quick call if he needed them, if trouble came
To their king. They knew how soldiers must live!

19

They sank into sleep. The price of that evening's
Rest was too high for the Dane who bought it
With his life, paying as others had paid
When Grendel inhabited Herot, the hall
His till his crimes pulled him into hell.
And now it was known that a monster had died
But a monster still lived, and meant revenge.
She'd brooded on her loss, misery had brewed
In her heart, that female horror, Grendel's
Mother, living in the murky cold lake
Assigned her since Cain had killed his only
Brother, slain his father's son
With an angry sword. God drove him off,
Outlawed him to the dry and barren desert,
And branded him with a murderer's mark. And he bore
A race of fiends accursed like their father;
So Grendel was drawn to Herot, an outcast
Come to meet the man who awaited him.
He'd snatched at Beowulf's arm, but that prince
Remembered God's grace and the strength He'd given him
And relied on the Lord for all the help,
The comfort and support he would need. He killed

The monster, as God had meant him to do,
Tore the fiend apart and forced him
To run as rapidly as he could toward death's
Cold waiting hands. His mother's sad heart,
And her greed, drove her from her den on the dangerous
Pathway of revenge.

1275

So she reached Herot,
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;
Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed
The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter
How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,
Fought with the power and courage men fight with,
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,
Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,
Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.
The soldiers raised their shields and drew
Those gleaming swords, swung them above
The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts
And their helmets where they'd lain when the terror took hold of them.
To save her life she moved still faster,
Took a single victim and fled from the hall,
Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper
Assured, sheltered in her dripping claws.

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1295

She'd taken Hrothgar's closest friend,
The man he most loved of all men on earth;⁶
She'd killed a glorious soldier, cut
A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her:
Beowulf and his band had been given better
Beds; sleep had come to them in a different
Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts:
She had carried off Grendel's claw. Sorrow
Had returned to Denmark. They'd traded deaths,
Danes and monsters, and no one had won,
Both had lost!

1300

1305

The wise old king
Trembled in anger and grief, his dearest
Friend and adviser dead. Beowulf
Was sent for at once: a messenger went swiftly
To his rooms and brought him. He came, his band
About him, as dawn was breaking through,
The best of all warriors, walking to where Hrothgar
Sat waiting, the gray-haired king wondering
If God would ever end this misery.
The Geats tramped quickly through the hall; their steps

1315

6. Esher, a Danish nobleman.

Beat and echoed in the silence. Beowulf
Rehearsed the words he would want with Hrothgar;
He'd ask the Danes' great lord if all
Were at peace, if the night had passed quietly.

20

Hrothgar answered him, protector of his people:

"There's no happiness to ask about! Anguish has descended
On the Danes. Esher is dead, Ermlaf's
Older brother and my own most trusted
Counselor and friend, my comrade, when we went
Into battle, who'd beaten back enemy swords,
Standing at my side. All my soldiers
Should be as he was, their hearts as brave
And as wise! Another wandering fiend
Has found him in Herot, murdered him, fled
With his corpse: he'll be eaten, his flesh become
A horrible feast—and who knows where
The beast may be hiding, its belly stuffed full?
She's taking revenge for your victory over Grendel,
For your strength, your mighty grip, and that monster's
Death. For years he'd been preying on my people;
You came, he was dead in a single day,
And now there's another one, a second hungry
Fiend, determined to avenge the first,
A monster willing and more than able
To bring us more sorrow—or so it must seem
To the many men mourning that noble
Treasure-giver, for all men were treated
Nobly by those hands now forever closed.
"I've heard that my people, peasants working
In the fields, have seen a pair of such fiends
Wandering in the moors and marshes, giant
Monsters living in those desert lands.
And they've said to my wise men that, as well as they could see,
One of the devils was a female creature.
The other, they say, walked through the wilderness
Like a man—but mightier than any man.
They were frightened, and they fled, hoping to find help
In Herot. They named the huge one Grendel:
If he had a father no one knew him,
Or whether there'd been others before these two,
Hidden evil before hidden evil.
They live in secret places, windy
Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist

1120
Stems like black clouds, and the groves of trees
Growing out over their lake are all covered
With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike
Roots that reach as far as the water
And help keep it dark. At night that lake
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
From faraway places, prefers to die
On those shores, refuses to save its life
In that water. It isn't far, nor is it
A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs
And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain
That the heavens weep. Our only help,
Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
Once more, and again twisted gold,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!"

21

Beowulf spoke:

"Let your sorrow end! It is better for us all
To avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.
Each of us will come to the end of this life
On earth; he who can earn it should fight
For the glory of his name; fame after death
Is the noblest of goals. Arise, guardian
Of this kingdom, let us go, as quickly as we can,
And have a look at this lady monster.
I promise you this: she'll find no shelter,
No hole in the ground, no towering tree,
No deep bottom of a lake, where her sins can hide.
Be patient for one more day of misery;
I ask for no longer."

The old king leaped

To his feet, gave thanks to God for such words.
Then Hrothgar's horse was brought, saddled
And bridled. The Danes' wise ruler rode,
Stately and splendid; shield-bearing soldiers
Marched at his side. The monster's tracks
Led them through the forest; they followed her heavy
Feet, that had swept straight across

The shadowy waste land, her burden the lifeless
Body of the best of Hrothgar's men. -
The trail took them up towering, rocky
Hills, and over narrow, winding
Paths they had never seen, down steep
And slippery cliffs where creatures from deep
In the earth hid in their holes. Hrothgar
Rode in front, with a few of his most knowing
Men, to find their way. Then suddenly,
Where clumps of trees bent across
Cold gray stones, they came to a dismal
Wood; below them was the lake, its water
Bloody and bubbling. And the Danes shivered,
Miserable, mighty men tormented
By grief, seeing, there on that cliff
Above the water, Esher's bloody
Head. They looked down at the lake, felt
How its heat rose up, watched the waves'
Blood-stained swirling. Their battle horns sounded,
Then sounded again. Then they set down their weapons.
They could see the water crawling with snakes,
Fantastic serpents swimming in the boiling
Lake, and sea beasts lying on the rocks
—The kind that infest the ocean, in the early
Dawn, often ending some ship's
Journey with their wild jaws. They rushed
Angrily out of sight, when the battle horns blew.
Beowulf aimed an arrow at one
Of the beasts, swimming sluggishly away,
And the point pierced its hide, stabbed
To its heart; its life leaked out, death
Swept it off. Quickly, before
The dying monster could escape, they hooked
Its thrashing body with their curved boar-spears,
Fought it to land, drew it up on the bluff,
Then stood and stared at the incredible wave-roamer,
Covered with strange scales and horrible. Then Beowulf
Began to fasten on his armor,
Not afraid for his life but knowing the woven
Mail, with its hammered links, could save
That life when he lowered himself into the lake,
Keep slimy monsters' claws from snatching at
His heart, preserve him for the battle he was sent
To fight. Hrothgar's helmet would defend him;
That ancient, shining treasure, encircled
With hard-rolled metal, set there by some smith's
Long dead hand, would block all battle

Swords, stop all blades from cutting at him
When he'd swum toward the bottom, gone down in the surging
Water, deep toward the swirling sands.
And Unferth helped him, Hrothgar's courtier
Lent him a famous weapon, a fine,
Hilted old sword named Hrunting; it had
An iron blade, etched and shining
And hardened in blood. No one who'd worn it
Into battle, swung it in dangerous places,
Daring and brave, had ever been deserted—
Nor was Beowulf's journey the first time it was taken
To an enemy's camp, or asked to support
Some hero's courage and win him glory.
Unferth had tried to forget his greeting
To Beowulf, his drunken speech of welcome;
A mighty warrior, he lent his weapon
To a better one. Only Beowulf would risk
His life in that lake; Unferth was afraid,
Gave up that chance to work wonders, win glory
And a hero's fame. But Beowulf and fear
Were strangers; he stood ready to dive into battle.

22

Then Edgetho's brave son⁷ spoke:

"Remember,
Hrothgar, Oh knowing king, now
When my danger is near, the warm words we uttered,
And if your enemy should end my life
Then be, oh generous prince, forever
The father and protector of all whom I leave
Behind me, here in your hands, my beloved
Comrades left with no leader, their leader
Dead. And the precious gifts you gave me,
My friend, send them to Higlac. May he see
In their golden brightness, the Geats' great lord
Gazing at your treasure, that here in Denmark
I found a noble protector, a giver
Of rings whose rewards I won and briefly
Relished. And you, Unferth, let
My famous old sword stay in your hands:
I shall shape glory with Hrunting, or death
Will hurry me from this earth!"

As his words ended
He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's

7. Beowulf.

Answer; the heaving water covered him
 Over. For hours he sank through the waves; -
 At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
 And all at once the greedy she-wolf
 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
 Years discovered him, saw that a creature
 From above had come to explore the bottom
 Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
 Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
 Tried to work her fingers through the tight
 Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
 And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
 And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
 To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
 Brought other monsters swimming to see
 Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
 His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
 As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
 That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
 And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
 Nor anything in the lake attack him through
 The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
 Light burned all around him, the lake
 Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw
 The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
 His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
 The iron sang its fierce song,
 Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
 Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
 Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
 Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
 And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
 And that too failed him; for the first time in years
 Of being wum to war it would earn no glory;
 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
 Longed only for fame, leaped back
 Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
 Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
 He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
 Comes to men who mean to win it
 And care about nothing else! He raised
 His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
 Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
 Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose

At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
 Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
 And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
 Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
 A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared
 To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
 On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
 The hammered links held; the point
 Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,
 Edgeth's son, and died there, if that shining
 Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
 For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
 Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

23

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
 Sword, hammered by giants, strong
 And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
 But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
 Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
 From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
 And then, savage, now, angry
 And desperate, lifted it high over his head
 And struck with all the strength he had left,
 Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
 Broke bones and all. Her body fell
 To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
 With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
 The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
 As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's
 Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
 At her home, then following along the wall
 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
 His heart still angry. He was hunting another
 Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
 For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
 Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
 And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
 Men slept, killing them in their beds,
 Eating some on the spot, fifteen
 Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
 With another such sickening meal waiting
 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,

ound him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
All the graybeards, whispered together
And said that hope was gone, that the hero
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never
Return to the living, come back as triumphant
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's
Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,
Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword

Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters' hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel's steaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle's only survivor
Swam up and away from those silent corpses;
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who'd lived in it
Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
Burdens he was bringing with him. He
And all his glorious band of Geats
Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
They left the lake together. The Geats
Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.
Behind them the water slowly thickened

As the monsters' blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across
Roads all of them remembered, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
Staggering under the weight of Grendel's skull,
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered
Herot, covered with glory for the daring
Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
To salute him and show Grendel's head.
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

24

Beowulf spoke:

"Hrothgar! Behold,
Great Healfdane's son, this glorious sign
Of victory, brought you by joyful Geats.
My life was almost lost, fighting for it,
Struggling under water: I'd have been dead at once,
And the fight finished, the she-devil victorious,
If our Father in Heaven had not helped me. Hrunting,
Unferth's noble weapon, could do nothing,
Nor could I, until the Ruler of the world
Showed me, hanging shining and beautiful
On a wall, a mighty old sword—so God
Gives guidance to those who can find it from no one
Else. I used the weapon He had offered me,
Drew it and, when I could, swung it, killed
The monstrous hag in her own home.
Then the ring-marked blade burned away,
As that boiling blood spilled out. I carried
Off all that was left, this hilt.
I've avenged their crimes, and the Danes they've killed.
And I promise you that whoever sleeps in Herot
—You, your brave soldiers, anyone
Of all the people in Denmark, old
Or young—they, and you, may now sleep"

Without fear of either monster, mother
Or son."

Then he gave the golden sword hilt
To Hrothgar, who held it in his wrinkled hands
And stared at what giants had made, and monsters
Owned; it was his, an ancient weapon
Shaped by wonderful smiths, now that Grendel
And his evil mother had been driven from the earth,
God's enemies scattered and dead. That best
Of swords belonged to the best of Denmark's
Rulers, the wisest ring-giver Danish
Warriors had ever known. The old king
Bent close to the handle of the ancient relic,
And saw written there the story of ancient wars
Between good and evil, the opening of the waters,
The Flood sweeping giants away, how they suffered
And died, that race who hated the Ruler
Of us all and received judgment from His hands,
Surging waves that found them wherever
They fled. And Hrothgar saw runic letters
Clearly carved in that shining hilt,
Spelling its original owner's name,
He for whom it was made, with its twisted
Handle and snakelike carvings. Then he spoke,
Healfdane's son, and everyone was silent.

"What I say, speaking from a full memory
And after a life spent in seeking
What was right for my people, is this: this prince
Of the Geats, Beowulf, was born a better
Man! Your fame is everywhere, my friend,
Reaches to the ends of the earth, and you hold it in your heart
wisely,
Patient with your strength and our weakness. What I said I will do, I
will do,
In the name of the friendship we've sworn. Your strength must solace your
people,
Now, and mine no longer.

"Be not
As Hermod⁸ once was to my people, too proud
To care what their hearts hid, bringing them
Only destruction and slaughter. In his mad
Rages he killed them himself, comrades
And followers who ate at his table. At the end
He was alone, knew none of the joys of life

8. An archetypal but partly historical Danish king, of great military prowess combined with the lowest possible character.

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With other men, a famous ruler
Granted greater strength than anyone
Alive in his day but dark and bloodthirsty
In spirit. He shared out no treasure, showed
His soldiers no road to riches and fame.
And then that affliction on his people's face
Suffered horribly for his sins. Be taught
By his lesson, learn what a king must be:
I tell his tale, old as I am,
Only for you.

"Our eternal Lord
Grants some men wisdom, some wealth, makes others
Great. The world is God's, He allows
A man to grow famous, and his family rich,
Gives him land and towns to rule
And delight in, lets his kingdom reach
As far as the world runs—and who
In human unwisdom, in the middle of such power,
Remembers that it all will end, and too soon?
Prosperity, prosperity, prosperity: nothing
Troubles him, no sickness, not passing time,
No sorrows, no sudden war breaking
Out of nowhere, but all the world turns
When he spins it. How can he know when he sins?

24 25
"And the Devil grows in his heart, planted
Quietly by the Devil. And while the keeper of his
Sleeps on, with conscience rests and the world
Turns faster a round, the Devil creeps closer, comes
A tight-strung bow, with terrible arrows.
And those sharp points, at home, are sharp
In his breast, under his heart. He's here
And so the Devil's dark urge, for he can't
Remember how he clung to the world's health
Of this world, how he clawed to it, how he earned
No honor, no glory, in giving away
Rings, how he forgot the God who gave him
God gave him at his birth, not forgetting
And finally his body, these bones
And flesh quicker than God fall
And die—and another soul inherits
His place in the world, some open-handed
Giver of treasures, who takes no delight
In mere gold. Guard against such wickedness,
Beloved Beowulf, best of warriors,

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