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Opening extract from **Beowulf**

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Published by
HarperCollins Children's Books

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Hear, and listen well, my friends, and I will tell you a tale that has been told for a thousand years and more. It may be an old story, yet, as you will discover, it troubles and terrifies us now as much as ever it did our ancestors, for we still fear the evil that stalks out there in the darkness and beyond. We know that each of us in our time, in our own way, must confront our fears and grapple with this monster of the night who, given a chance, would invade our homes, and even our hearts, if he could.

So roll back the years now, back to the fifth century after the birth of Christ, and come with me over the sea to the Norse lands we now know as Sweden and Norway and Denmark, to the ancient Viking lands of the Danes and the Geats, the Angles and the Jutes. This will be our here and now, as this tale of courage and

cruelty unfolds, as brave Beowulf battles with the forces of darkness, first with that foul fiend Grendel, then with his sea-hag of a mother, and last of all, with the death-dragon of the deep.

The story begins as all stories do, before it begins, for there is always a mother before a mother, and a king before a king. In Denmark all the great lords, those royal descendants of Scyld, that great and good king, followed in his footsteps and stayed strong against their foes and loyal to their friends. The kingdom prospered. From their conquests the land grew rich, so that the people flourished and were happy. Feared by their enemies, loved by their allies, the kingdom of the Danes became great and powerful in the world.

Then the lord Hrothgar came to the throne, son of the old King Healfdene, great grandson of Scyld, and he was to

become the greatest warrior king of them all. Fierce in battle, he fetched back home more treasures from his conquests than had ever before been seen or even dreamt of in Denmark. But he was generous too and a good father to his people, so that they obeyed him always gladly. Hearing of his increasing glory in battles, more and more warriors came to join him. It seemed to them and to him that there could never be an end to all his power and wealth. The kingdom was safe from its enemies, the people warm at their hearths and well fed. Truly it was a land of sweet content.

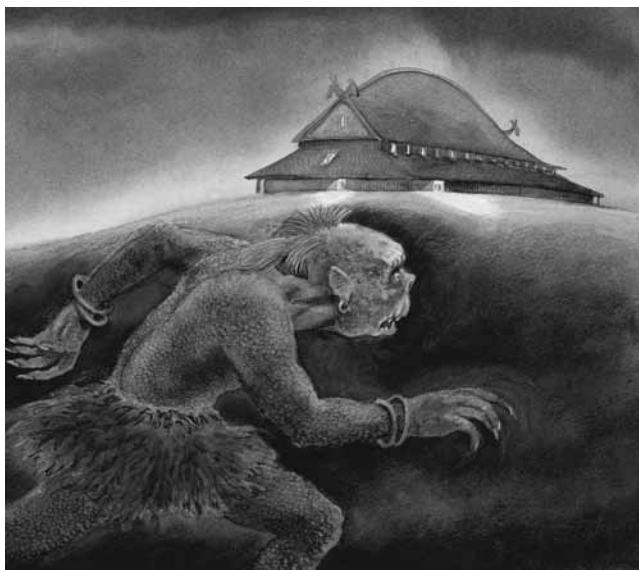
To celebrate these years of prosperity and plenty, Hrothgar decided he would raise for his people a huge mead-hall. It must, he declared, be larger and more splendid than any mead-hall ever built. Only the best timbers were used, only the finest craftsmen. At Hrothgar's bidding



they came from all over Denmark to construct it, so that in no time at all the great hall was finished. It was truly even more magnificent than he had ever imagined it could be. Heorot he called it, and at the first banquet he gave there, Hrothgar, by way of thanks, gave out to each and every person rings and armbands of glowing gold. No king could have been kinder, no

people as proud and as happy. Night after night they feasted in Heorot, and listened to the music of the harp and song of the poet. And every night the poet told them that story they most loved to hear: how God had made the earth in all its beauty, its mountains and meadows, seas and skies; how he had made the sun and the moon to light it, the corn and the trees to grow on it; how he gave life and being to every living creature that crawls and creeps and moves on land or in the sea or in the air. And man too he made to live in this paradise. Around the warming hearth they listened to the poet's story, enraptured, enthralled and entranced.

But there was another listener. Outside the walls of Heorot in the dim and the dark there stalked an enemy from hell itself, the monster Grendel, sworn enemy of God and men alike, a beast born of evil



and shame. He heard that wondrous story of God's good creation, and because it was good it was hateful to his ears. He heard the sweet music of the harp, and afterwards the joyous laughter echoing through the hall as the mead-horn was passed around. Nothing had ever so enraged this beast as night after night he had to listen to all this happiness and

harmony. It was more than his evil heart could bear.

The night Grendel struck was the darkest night of all. He waited until Hrothgar had gone to his bed, until only the lords who nightly guarded Heorot were left. They were fast asleep when he pounced. He was upon them so suddenly and with such violence and fury that none could escape the terrible slaughter. Thirty lords he murdered in his bloodlust, as savage and swift in his death-dealing as a mad-dened fox in a chicken hut. He left not one of them alive, but carried them off home to his lair to feast on their blooded corpses at his leisure. Only when day broke did Hrothgar and his warriors discover the dreadful evidence of the holocaust at Heorot. Gone now were the laughter and the music. Hrothgar sat silent in his grief and despair. His warriors too mourned

and lamented the loss of their friends and brothers-in-arms. All were stunned at the merciless cruelty of this fatal fiend of the darkness. But the horrors were not yet over, for the next night Grendel came again, stalking over the foggy moors and down through the forests towards Heorot. The warriors had barricaded themselves in this time, and believed they must be safe. They could not have known that against this hellish monster all such defences would be useless. In a frenzy of hate, Grendel burst in and slaughtered everyone he found there, gorging himself at will. He spared no one.

From that night on, no one, not even Hrothgar, dared sleep again in Heorot. And so the great mead-hall stood empty, and stayed empty. Grendel the monster now ruled in Denmark, a rule of terror that haunted Hrothgar and all his people,



wherever they lived, men, women and children alike. For twelve long winters Grendel warred unceasingly on the Danes, picking his blood victims at random, the innocent and the sick too, children and newborn babes. He was utterly without mercy.

Again and again he came to his killing ground, always unseen in the black of night. No plan Hrothgar and the council thanes devised could protect them from his fury, no prayers to the Almighty, no



sacrifices to ancient heathen gods. Anywhere he struck, any farmstead, any cottage. Anywhere and everywhere. Nothing could put an end to these endless terror raids. A great and terrible grief darkened the land, banishing all happiness, all hope. Even the noble Hrothgar sat sunk in sorrow. Deep in his despair the Danish king could see no reprieve from this hideous nightmare visited so often

upon his people by this fearful monster.

By now the story of this dreadful tragedy, of the nightly suffering Hrothgar and his people were enduring, had spread far and wide. They had heard about it too across the water in the land of King Hygelac of the Geats, for a long time

faithful allies of the Danish kingdom. But only one of them, the greatest and bravest of all princes – Beowulf he was called – decided this evil beast of the night must be punished for all his wrongdoing, that Heorot must be cleansed of this wickedness and Hrothgar and his people saved at last, even if Beowulf had to give his own life to achieve it.

Family and friends, Edgetheow his father, and his uncle the good King Hygelac himself, all of them did what they could to dissuade him from this reckless, perilous mission. But all advice, all omens, only whetted Beowulf's determination to go to Denmark and slay this monster of the night. He ordered a strong and seaworthy ship to be fitted out for the quest, and hand-picked fourteen of the fiercest warriors he knew. Out of the sheltered fjord they rowed this sturdy

warship, and set sail for Denmark, riding the wind-whipped waves over the sea.

In brisk breezes the ship fair flew along, ploughing the storm-tossed ocean, until at last the shadow of land along the horizon became the rearing cliffs and capes of Denmark. Soon Beowulf and his ring-mailed thanes were leaping ashore, each one thanking God most fervently for his safe arrival. From the cliff high above them Hrothgar's startled watchman saw men land, and wondered who they were, whether friend or foe. He rode down to the beach straight away and challenged them at the point of his spear.

"Who are you, strangers? Where do you come from? I see you dressed and armed as warriors ready for battle. In all my years patrolling this coast no one has landed more openly. You do not come like thieves in the night, and your faces speak to me of



some honest purpose. And I can plainly see that your prince, who stands head and shoulders higher than the rest of you, has the look of a hero about him, of great nobility and grace. Yet you are not known to us. Certainly Hrothgar has had no warning of your coming. So tell me your names and declare your intent frankly so I may know whether to let you pass or not."

Beowulf spoke up then, opening his heart honestly to the Danish coastguard.

"We have come here from my lord Hygelac, king of the Geats, your ally and your good friend. All the world knows of the piteous misfortune that has befallen this land, of that marauding monster Grendel and all his murderous massacres. We have come here to destroy him if we can. So lead us to Hrothgar, that great and glorious guardian of his people. Take us to Heorot, the heart of his kingdom, and take

us there as fast as possible. There is no time to lose."

"You sound to me and you look to me like a man of your word," replied the coastguard. "So accepting all in good faith, I will bring you myself to Heorot, to my lord Hrothgar, who will, I know, rejoice at your coming. Meanwhile while you are gone on your great and noble quest, my men will see to it that your ship is well guarded."

So in war-dress of chainmail shirts, carrying their long ashen spears and great war-shields, Beowulf and his warriors left their ship anchored fast in the lee of the cliff, and marched inland, their helmets gleaming bright in the afternoon sun;



strong helmets that would surely protect them against the worst any enemy could do, or so they thought.

On they went until they saw at long last, in the distance, Hrothgar's home, Heorot, that glorious palace adorned with glowing gold, a house fit for any king on earth. Here the coastguard left them, pointing the way.

"I must return to resume my watch for sea-raiders," he said. "May the God we all love protect you in all you do, wherever you go, and bring you safely back to your ship again, and back to your hearth and home."

Weary now from their long sea journey Beowulf and his war-band made their way up the stone path towards the great hall of Heorot, where they were greeted at the gate by Wulfgar, Hrothgar's herald.

"Lay aside your shields and spears," he commanded them. "Stack them against



the wall, for you will have no need of them inside. I see friendship in your eyes, nobility in your bearing, and know that we have nothing to fear from you. But tell me who you are, and what you've come for, dressed as you are for war."

"I am Beowulf, prince of the Geats, nephew of Hygelac the king, and if you would kindly allow us to speak face to face with Hrothgar, your gracious king, we will explain to him in full the purpose of our sea-tossed journey to the land of the Danes."

Wulfgar the herald was as wise in judgement as he was fierce in war, and let them at once into Heorot to meet Hrothgar, his beloved master, grey-haired now with sorrowing.

"These men, grim though they may look in their mail-armour, have come in peace, I am sure of it, my king," Wulfgar

declared before the king and his thanes. "Chief among them, and the renowned prince of the Geats, is the noble Beowulf, nephew of Hygelac, your friend and ally of a lifetime. Such a trusty man can only have come to help us, I think."

Sudden hope warmed the old king's heart as he looked upon Beowulf standing there before him.

"You will not remember me," he said, "I knew you once as a child, when I came to the land of the Geats. Ever since then the Geats have been my lifelong friends and allies. You are most heartily welcome to Heorot, for I know of you by hearsay also. Everyone here does. I heard tell that you possess the strength of at least thirty men in each hand. I am thinking, and I am hoping and I am praying, that you might have been sent here to us by God himself as our salvation, to stand against Grendel,



that fiend of the night. Perhaps, Beowulf, it is only you that has the power to deal the monster the death-blow we long for, the end he so richly deserves.”

Mighty in his ring-meshed mail and gloriously helmed in silver, Beowulf stood tall before Hrothgar and his thanes, every one of them praying too that this man would indeed prove to be their earthly redeemer, their strong avenger. They listened well as he spoke.

“I have come, great king of the Danes,” Beowulf began, “as Hygelac’s hearth-kinsman, and in his name I am here to serve you as I have served him in many a battle. All the Geats have heard of your plight, of this evil Grendel who, after the shadows fall, prowls this hall, making of it his nightly lair. From seafarers and

travellers we have learned how each night this most splendid of mead-halls must be surrendered to Grendel, the night stalker, how he preys foully on your people, eating their flesh, drinking their blood.

“I am no poet, my lord king, nor a harp player. I am a fighter. I am known at home and wherever I go as a warrior prince, as an enemy of all evil. I have only last year dealt death to five giants who threatened our land, broken their necks with my bare hands. I did the same to dozens of sea-serpents who plagued our waters. If I could do that much, I thought, then I could go over the sea to you, great Hrothgar, and offer to rid you of Grendel, this vile and loathsome destroyer. Why, I thought, should I not face him in a trial of strength and destroy the destroyer?

“So I stand here in Heorot, your kingly hall and home, with my good companions,

ready and willing to serve you. All of us are strong and steadfast in our determination to drive out this evil once and for all, to bring peace and joy again to your kingdom and to restore you at last to your rightful hearth. Be assured, I shall do all that is in my power to achieve this. It is my promise.”

All their long-lingering sorrow was banished as Hrothgar and his thanes listened to Beowulf’s brave words and, looking upon him, no one there doubted for one moment that Beowulf could achieve and would achieve all he promised.

“I have heard,” Beowulf went on, “that Grendel never carries a weapon, no war axe, no sword, on his murderous missions. Well then, neither will I. I seek no advantage. I need no advantage. I will carry no shield, nor wear any armour. I shall go up against this beast bareheaded, just as I

fought the giants and sea-serpents. With my bare hands I shall grapple with this foul fiend and fight him to the death. Whichever of us dies must face the Lord of Judgement, as we all must when the time comes. I ask only that, should the worst befall me, send to Hygelac, my king, this battle-shirt of chainmail I now wear. There will, I fear, be nothing of us left to bury, should this flesh-eating monster prevail over us. In that case, from all I hear, he would carry off our bloody corpses to his unlovely larder and feast on us as he has on so many brave men before us. But God willing it will not turn out like that.”

Hrothgar rose slowly to his feet. “You cannot imagine what joy you bring us in coming here to Heorot,” he cried. “For me and for all of Denmark it is truly a blessed and timely arrival. You shall, I promise you, be well rewarded for your kindness,

your concern for us and for your great courage. We have been for twelve long years a people in pain, with nothing but fear and hate in our hearts. Sadly my hall and hearth companions have been sorely dwindled in numbers by the ravages of this ruthless killer. So many have tried to stand against him. Their courage whetted by beer, each roared his defiance, boasting, ale cup in hand, that he would wait here in Heorot after nightfall and tear the evil one limb from limb when he came.

“But when morning came it was always the same gruesome story. Heorot had become a slaughterhouse yet again, the walls blood-spattered and the floors blood-soaked, and my dear brave kinsmen all gone as meat to the monster’s lair. But none of these was as mighty a warrior as you, Beowulf. They had courage in full measure, but not the strength. You have

both. So, bring your men, sit down, eat with us and drink with us. Tell us the stories of your great exploits, for just to hear them would fill our hearts with new hope and happiness.”

Then a space was cleared at the banqueting table for Beowulf and his Geats, and the horn of sweet mead was passed around from Geat to Dane and Dane to Geat. That evening the poet stood and sang his words, and the harp played softly, and the lilting lute and laughter echoed once again through the rafters of Heorot.

