

# Beowulf

## Translated by Burton Raffle

### THE WRATH OF GRENDEL

A powerful monster, living down  
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient  
As day after day the music rang  
Loud in that hall, (1) the harp's rejoicing  
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung  
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling  
The Almighty making the earth, shaping  
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,  
Then proudly setting the sun and moon  
10 To glow across the land and light it;  
The corners of the earth were made lovely with  
trees And leaves, made quick with life, with each  
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then  
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:  
15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall  
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,  
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild  
Marshes, and made his home in a hell  
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,  
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born  
Of Cain, (2) murderous creatures banished  
By God, punished forever for the crime  
Marshes, and made his home in a hell  
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,  
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born  
Of Cain, (2) murderous creatures banished  
By God, punished forever for the crime  
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove  
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,  
25 Shut away from men; they split  
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits  
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,  
A brood forever opposing the Lord's  
Will, and again and again defeated.

30           Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel  
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors  
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.  
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting  
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's  
35   Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:  
He slipped through the door and there in the silence  
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them  
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,  
The blood dripping behind him, back  
40   To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.  
          At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw  
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning  
Broke their long feast with tears and laments  
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless  
45   In Herot, a mighty prince mourning  
The fate of his lost friends and companions,  
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn  
His followers apart. He wept, fearing  
The beginning might not be the end. And that night  
50   Grendel came again, so set  
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,  
No savage assault quench his lust  
For evil. Then each warrior tried  
To escape him, searched for rest in different  
55   Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,  
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.  
Distance was safety; the only survivors  
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.  
          So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,  
60   One against many, and won; so Herot  
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,  
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king  
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door  
By **hell-forged** hands. His misery leaped  
65   The seas, was told and sung in all  
Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,  
How the monster relished his savage war  
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud  
Alive, seeking no peace, offering  
70   No truce, accepting no settlement, no price  
In gold or land, and paying the living

For one crime only with another. No one  
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:  
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,  
75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old  
And young, lying in waiting, hidden  
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge  
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.  
So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,  
80 Killing as often as he could, coming  
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived  
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never  
Dared to touch King Hrothgar's glorious  
Throne, protected by God—God,  
Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's  
Heart was bent. The best and most noble  
Of his council debated remedies, sat  
In secret sessions, talking of terror  
And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.  
90 And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,  
Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's  
Support, the Devil's guidance in driving  
Their affliction off. That was their way,  
And the heathen's only hope, Hell  
95 Always in their hearts, knowing neither God  
Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord  
Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear  
His praise nor know His glory. Let them  
Beware, those who are thrust into danger,  
100 Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace  
In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail  
To those who will rise to God, drop off  
Their dead bodies and seek our Father's peace!

## THE COMING OF BEOWULF

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son (3)  
105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom  
Or strength could break it: that agony hung  
On king and people alike, harsh  
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.  
In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's (4)

110 Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater  
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—  
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror  
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,  
Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king.

115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,  
Now when help was needed. None  
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much  
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,  
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf

120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,  
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen  
In all, and led them down to their boat;  
He knew the sea, would point the prow  
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

Then they sailed, set their ship  
Out on the waves, under the cliffs.  
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,  
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne  
In the lap of their shining ship, lined

130 With gleaming armor, going safely  
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.  
The wind hurried them over the waves,  
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird  
Until, in the time they had known it would take,

135 Standing in the round-curved prow they could see  
Sparkling hills, high and green  
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing  
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended  
Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats

140 Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it  
In place, mail (5) shirts and armor rattling  
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then  
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.  
High on a wall a Danish watcher  
Patrolling along the cliffs saw  
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields  
Raised and shining; he came riding down,  
Hrothgar's lieutenant, spurring his horse,  
Needing to know why they'd landed, these men

150 In armor. Shaking his heavy spear  
In their faces he spoke:

“Whose soldiers are you,  
You who’ve been carried in your deep-keeled ship  
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?  
Listen! I’ve stood on these cliffs longer  
155 Than you know, keeping our coast free  
Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore  
From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.  
None have ever come more openly—  
And yet you’ve offered no password, no sign  
160 From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing  
Here. Nor have I ever seen,  
Out of all the men on earth, one greater  
Than has come with you; no commoner carries  
Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty  
Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,  
And your father’s; no spies go further onto Danish  
Soil than you’ve come already. Strangers,  
From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,  
And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,  
170 I say, for us all. Speak, say  
Exactly who you are, and from where, and why.”  
Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking  
Words from deep in his breast:  
“We are Geats,  
Men who follow Higlac. My father  
175 Was a famous soldier, known far and wide  
As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.  
His life lasted many winters;  
Wise men all over the earth surely  
Remember him still. And we have come seeking  
180 Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector  
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,  
Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand  
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king  
Of the Danes no secret; there’s nothing dark  
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we’ve heard  
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country  
Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature  
That hunts only at night and that no one  
Has seen. It’s said, watchman, that he has slaughtered  
190 Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps  
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,

For some way to drive this devil out—  
If anything will ever end the evils  
Afflicting your wise and famous lord.

195 Here he can cool his burning sorrow.  
Or else he may see his suffering go on  
Forever, for as long as Herot towers  
High on your hills.”

The mounted officer

Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:

200 “A soldier should know the difference between words  
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear  
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in  
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor  
And all, on into Denmark. I’ll guide you

205 Myself—and my men will guard your ship,  
Keep it safe here on our shores,  
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,  
Until that curving prow carries  
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen

210 Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature  
Haunting our people, who survives that horror  
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love.”

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,  
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top

215 Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,  
Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,  
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready  
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men  
And their guide, until they could see the gables

220 Of Herot, covered with hammered gold  
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,  
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs  
Visible far across the land.

Their guide reined in his horse, pointing

225 To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best  
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,  
They could see their way. . . .

Beowulf and his men arrive at Herot and are called to see their way  
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Beowulf arose, with his men

230 Around him, ordering a few to remain

With their weapons, leading the others quickly  
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's  
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,  
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt  
235 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted  
The Danes' great lord:  
                                "Hail, Hrothgar!  
Higlac is my cousin (6) and my king; the days  
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's  
Name has echoed in our land: sailors  
240 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best  
Of all mead-halls, (7) deserted and useless when the moon  
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,  
Light and life fleeing together.  
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing  
245 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'  
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,  
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,  
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove  
Five great giants into chains, chased  
250 All of that race from the earth. I swam  
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters  
Out of the ocean, and killing them one  
By one; death was my errand and the fate  
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called  
255 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,  
Lord and protector of this noble place,  
A single request! I have come so far,  
O shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,  
That this one favor you should not refuse me—  
260 That I, alone and with the help of my men,  
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,  
Too, that the monster's scorn of men  
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.  
Nor will I. My lord Higlac  
265 Might think less of me if I let my sword  
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid  
Behind some broad linden (8) shield: my hands  
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life  
Against the monster. God must decide  
270 Who will be given to death's cold grip.  
Grendel's plan, I think, will be

What it has been before, to invade this hall  
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,  
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,  
275 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare  
For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody  
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones  
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls  
Of his den. No, I expect no Danes  
280 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.  
And if death does take me, send the hammered  
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return  
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he  
From Wayland. (9) Fate will unwind as it must!"

That night Beowulf and his men stay inside Herot. While his men sleep, Beowulf lies awake, eager to meet with Grendel.

## THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

285 Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty  
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
Grendel came, hoping to kill  
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.  
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,  
290 Up from his swampland, sliding silently  
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's  
Home before, knew the way—  
But never, before nor after that night,  
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception  
295 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,  
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,  
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch  
And rushed angrily over the threshold.  
He strode quickly across the inlaid  
300 Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes  
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome  
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall  
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
With rows of young soldiers resting together.  
305 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,  
Intended to tear the life from those bodies  
By morning; the monster's mind was hot



With the thought of food and the feasting his belly  
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended  
310 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones  
Of his last human supper. Human  
Eyes were watching his evil steps,  
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.  
Grendel snatched at the first Geat  
315 He came to, ripped him apart, cut  
His body to bits with powerful jaws,  
Drank the blood from his veins and bolted  
Him down, hands and feet; death  
And Grendel's great teeth came together,  
320 Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another  
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,  
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper  
—And was instantly seized himself, claws  
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.  
325 That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,  
Knew at once that nowhere on earth  
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;  
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing  
Could take his talons and himself from that tight  
330 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run  
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:  
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.  
But Higlac's follower remembered his final  
Boast and, standing erect, stopped  
335 The monster's flight, fastened those claws  
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel  
Closer. The infamous killer fought  
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,  
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws  
340 Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot  
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!  
The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,  
And Danes shook with terror. Down  
The aisles the battle swept, angry  
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully  
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling  
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;  
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside  
And out, artfully worked, the building

350 Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell  
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating  
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.  
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot  
To stand forever; only fire,  
355 They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put  
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor  
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly  
The sounds changed, the Danes started  
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible  
360 Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang  
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain  
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's  
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms  
Of him who of all the men on earth  
365 Was the strongest.  
That mighty protector of men  
Meant to hold the monster till its life  
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use  
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's  
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral  
370 Swords raised and ready, determined  
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage  
Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel  
From every side, trying to open  
A path for his evil soul, but their points  
375 Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron  
Could not scratch at his skin, for that **sin-stained** demon  
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells  
That blunted every mortal man's blade.  
And yet his time had come, his days  
380 Were over, his death near; down  
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless  
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.  
Now he discovered—once the afflictor  
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant  
385 To feud with Almighty God: Grendel  
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws  
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at  
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,  
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,  
390 And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder

Snapped, muscle and bone split  
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf  
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,  
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,  
395 His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,  
Only to die, to wait for the end  
Of all his days. And after that bloody  
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.  
He who had come to them from across the sea,  
400 Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction  
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,  
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes  
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,  
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,  
405 Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering  
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people  
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted  
The victory, for the proof, hanging high  
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's  
410 Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

The Danes celebrate Beowulf's victory. That night, though, Grendel's mother kills Hrothgar's closest friend and carries off her child's claw. The next day the horrified king tells Beowulf about the two monsters and their underwater lair.