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Beowulf: Dragonslayer

# **BEOWULF: DRAGONSLAYER**

Retold by

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Illustrated by Charles Keeping

## 1. The Seafarers

## 1. The Seafarers

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IN the great hall of Hygelac, King of the Geats, supper was over and the mead horns going round. It was the time of evening, with the dusk gathering beyond the firelight, when the warriors called for Beowulf: Dragonslayer Angelm the King's bard to wake his harp for their amusement; but tonight they had something else to listen to than the half-sung, half-told stories of ancient heroes that they knew by heart. Tonight there were strangers in their midst, seafarers with the salt still in their hair, from the first trading ship Beowulf: Dragonslayer to reach them since the ice melted and the wild geese came North again. And their Captain sat in the Guest Seat that faced the High Seat of the King, midway up the hall, and told the news of the coasts and islands and Beowulf: Dragonslayer the northern seas.

He leaned forward in the great carved seat, a small man with his hands on his knees, and his long-sighted seaman's gaze coming and going about the smoky hall, and told amongst lesser matters, how Hrothgar, the great warrior king of the Danish Beowulf: Dragonslayer folk, had built for himself a mighty mead-hall where he and his household warriors might feast and make merry, and give a fitting welcome to any strangers and wayfarers who came among them.

'A great hall, a most fine hall!' said the Sea Captain, while the rest of his crew on the mead benches nodded and muttered their agreement. 'Longer and loftier even than this in which my lord Hygelac has Beowulf: Dragonslayer feasted us so royally tonight. And Hrothgar set up high on its gable end the gilded antlers of a stag, and called the place for that reason, Heorot the Hart. Aye, but he might have done better to have lived out his days in a shepherd's bothie; for small joy has the Danish King of his mead hall.' And he drank deep from the mead horn as it was handed to him, and shook his head, and waited to be asked why.

Hygelac laughed a little, playing with the ears of Heardred his Beowulf: Dragonslayer small son, as though the boy had been a favourite hound propped against his knee. 'And why has the Danish King such small joy of his mead hall?'

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‘Because,’ said the Sea Captain, ‘before Beowulf: Dragonslayer even a King makes merry, it is as well that he should know who may hear the laughter in the dark outside.’ And eager as he was to tell the story, he glanced aside into the blue dusk that thickened beyond the foreporch doorway.

‘Who heard?’ demanded Hygelac, no longer laughing; and the sea beyond the keel-strand sounded very near as they waited.

The Sea Captain looked about him as though gathering his hearers closer; he would have made a story-teller to equal Angelm, if he had chosen the harp instead of the steering-oar. ‘Grendel, the Night Stalker,’ he said at last. ‘Grendel the Man-Wolf, the Beowulf: Dragonslayer Death-Shadow, who has his lair among the sea inlets and the coastal marshes. He heard the laughter and the harp-song from the King’s high hall, and it troubled him in his dark dreams, and he roused and came up out of the waste lands and snuffed about the porch. The door stood unfastened in the usual way—though it would have been little hindrance to *him* had it been barred to keep out a war-host.’ His listeners nodded, and huddled closer to the long fires, and here and there a man glanced behind him into the shadows. They all knew that bolts and bars could no more keep out the Troll-kind than blade of mortal forging could bite on their scaly hides.

‘Grendel prowled in, hating all men and all joy, and hungry for human life. So swift was his attack that no man heard an outcry; but when the dawn came, thirty of Hrothgar’s best and noblest thanes were missing, and only the blood splashed on walls and floor, and the Beowulf: Dragonslayer monster’s footprints oozing red, remained to tell their fate.’

A deep murmur ran from man to man all up and down the crowded hall, and Hygelac said, ‘This is an evil story that you tell, my friend.’

‘Aye, evil enough, and the end is not yet reached, for having once roused, the Night Stalker does not sleep again, but comes back and back and back; and to this day after Beowulf: Dragonslayer the dark comes down Heorot is a place forsaken and accursed.’

‘But can Hrothgar find no champions in all Denmark strong enough to Beowulf: Dragonslayer rid him of this horror?’

The Sea Captain shook his Beowulf: Dragonslayer head. ‘At first there were plenty bold enough to spend the night in Hrothgar’s hall—especially when the mead was in them. But in the morning nothing was ever left of them save the blood splashed on the floor. And so the time came long since when no more champions could be found.’

‘And still he comes, this monster, even though the hall is empty?’

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‘Perhaps he hopes always for the time when some man sleeps again in Heorot the Hart. Still he comes; and every morning the mirey footprints and the salt-marsh smell are left to tell where Grendel Beowulf: Dragonslayer prowled among the mead benches in the last night’s dark. And Hrothgar the King grows old in sorrow, and in the hope—but he can have little hope left him now—that one day Wyrd who weaves the fates of men may send him a champion strong enough to free him and his people from the Death-Shadow that fills their nights with horror.’

Among the thanes crowding the long benches, one leaned forward, his arms across his knees and his eyes levelled on the Sea Captain’s face, Beowulf: Dragonslayer as though the dark tale struck closer home to him than to the rest. A young man, fair-headed and grey-eyed as most of his fellows were, but taller than they by half a head, and with strength that could out-wrestle the great Northern bear showing in the quiet muscles of his neck and shoulders. He sat in a place that Beowulf: Dragonslayer was not particularly high, nor yet particularly lowly; indeed he was one who seldom cared about his rightful place unless another man thought to deny it to him. Yet there was something in his face and his whole bearing that would have marked him for what he was, even to the passing glance of a stranger. For this was Beowulf, sister’s-son to the King and Beowulf: Dragonslayer foremost among his warriors.

## Beowulf Dragonslayer

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