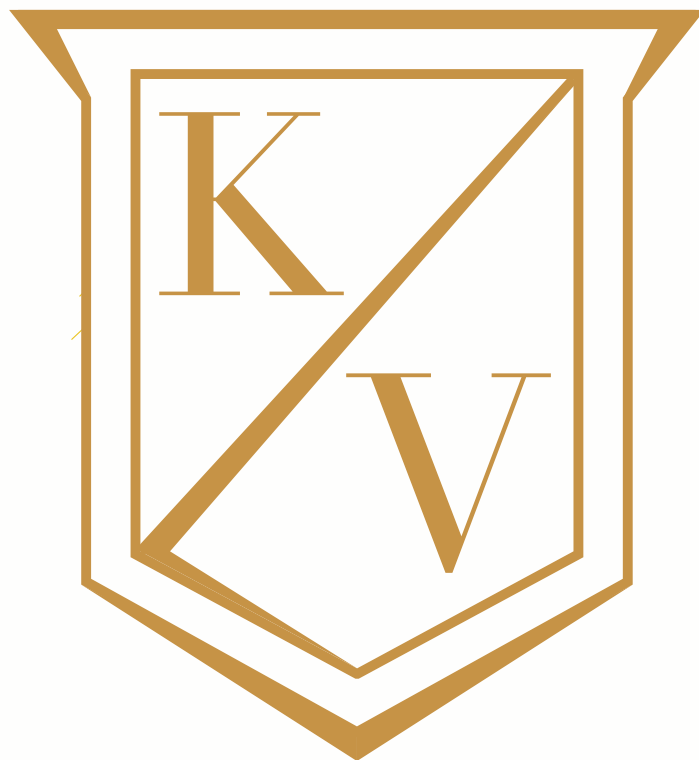


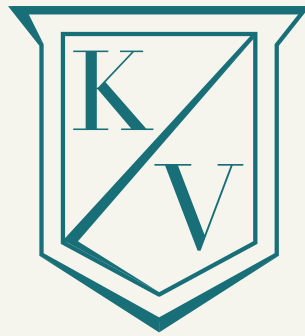
Knightly Virtues



Beowulf

Learning About the Virtue
of Courage

Heroes Who Inspire



THE STORY

Beowulf

Story retold by Jon Davison



Beowulf — The Story

Prologue

Listen carefully my friend, for we are about to take a wondrous journey. Far from this place of warmth and light. We will leave the sunlight and sunshine of the playground and classroom. We will travel back from the time of motorways, supermarkets, skyscrapers, laptops, wi-fi and spaceships to a time when 'Bluetooth' was the nickname of kind king Harald Gormsson. Come with me and we will skim the salt spray of the tawny whale road. We will watch countless curves of sunrise and sunset shoot by in the blink of an eye and spy diamond-dust stars spiral and spin across the dark sapphire skies.

We are travelling north and east to the lands you know as Scandinavia. Back to a time of Arctic lights, dragons and nameless monsters that skulked in shadows and drifted in the dark... Back to a time of courageous men and women, sword-bearers and shield-maidens. Back also to a time of families and friendship.

King Hrothgar and Heorot

In those days King Hrothgar ordered that a handsome meeting Hall be built on the very top of a craggy crop of ragged rock on a hill at the edge of a misty, mournful moor. Such a beautiful building had not been seen before. A handsome mansion of the strongest wood, cut, carved and crafted from mighty oaks. Its top pierced the very clouds that scudded across the skies. The huge Hall was hung with shields of silver and gold that shone and sparkled in the flickering flames of friendly fire. Bronze, ivory and all manner of jewels and coins filled the iron-bound chests that lined the walls. Rich materials of the finest cloth and silks, furs and leather hung from the walls and covered the floors.

Striding through the great Hall, Hrothgar smiled and said,
“This Hall I shall call ‘Heorot – The Hall of the Hart’”.

Huge deer antlers were fixed over the main entrance to the Hall. Hrothgar’s faithful followers let out a mighty cheer that filled the room and echoed loudly across the mournful moor. So full of joy was the crowd in the Hall that not one of them heard the hateful howling whine that echoed through the misty mire...

Heorot became a Valhalla, a paradise in Norse mythology where departed warriors were watched over by the mighty Norse god Odin, father of Thor, battling by day and feasting by night. Every night King Hrothgar filled the Hall with friendship and feasting on roasted meat and drinking from flagons of frothing and foaming mead. Night after night, stories and song filled the Hall. Old tales of daring and dragons, warriors and wizards, serpents and sea-monsters and honour and courage, filled the warm air that wrapped around the company like a thick blanket woven from the finest wool.

Filled with food, awash with ale, sated with stories, faithful in friendship the kind king departed to his bed while his kinsmen curled in the furry firelight of the Hall. Sleeping and safe – or so they thought.

Grendel

Out in the dark, darker than a moonless midnight in a mountain cave, something stirred. Something evil: a malevolent monster; a boiling ball of blisters and bile; a spinning spiral of spiteful splinters sharp as sharks’ teeth; a rage of razors. A monster that loathed laughter and was jealous of joy. A monster whose heart overflowed with hatred of happiness. Night after night, every song and shout of joy, every laugh that echoed from the Hall across the shimmering swamps felt like the sharp slash of a sword to the beast, Grendel.

At last Grendel could stand no more.

Slinking through the reeds, wading through the water, Grendel’s green breath mixed with the

miry mist. Black blood pulsed in his brain as his glowing deep-red eyes watched Hrothgar bid good night to the Hall guards and depart. Now no sound came from Heorot save the snuffling snores of the sleeping warriors.

A tremendous thunderclap filled the skies.

But this was not thunder. The ancient oak beam that secured the door shivered and split. Sharp splinters sped through the air as the tempest of teeth and talons that was Grendel stormed into the great Hall. The Hall guards barely had time to raise their weapons before Grendel was upon them in his fury. Sleepers had no time to open their eyes before they felt the clash of claws. The walls of Heorot echoed with the monster's roars and the wailing cries of his victims.

Soon, too soon, all was still. Smoke and soot left by the fire-giant Surtr drifted slowly to the rafters. The Hall was silent. Outside there were awful squelching squishes as Grendel skulked across swampy soil back to his lair.

There was great sorrow and mourning between King Hrothgar and his people, but they were determined not to be beaten by the awful Grendel.

'Heorot will be repaired,' declared Hrothgar. And so it was.

'It will be filled with warmth and light. It will echo again with song and laughter'. And so it did.

But anger and hatred formed in every muscle and sinew of Grendel's vile being. Vengeance pulsed through his veins. Grendel returned to punish the revellers in Heorot. Time and again the Hall was rebuilt, only to be ruined by Grendel. Time and again laughter turned to loss, song turned to sorrow. Until after months, with great sadness, King Hrothgar commanded the Hall to be closed forever. Grendel had triumphed.

Dark and desolate Heorot's dusty, dank banqueting tables fell into disrepair. Owls nested in the rafters. Rooks roosted on the roof.

..... A Hero Comes

News travels fast. Bad news travels faster. Stories of the terrible events at Heorot spread though Denmark and beyond its borders. They were heard in that part of Sweden where lived the folk known as 'Geats'.

One night sitting by the fire, the warrior prince Beowulf heard tales of the events at Heorot. As a boy, Beowulf had met Hrothgar and he admired the King as a man of wisdom, courage and honour.

Like all brave Norsemen, honour was at the heart of all that prince Beowulf did in his service to his people. Only a month earlier, with his bare hands, he had killed seven giants that had

terrorised local farmsteads, destroying homes, killing and eating livestock. In recent years, he had cleansed the coastline of sea serpents and tentacled beasts that had plagued the seas and wrecked many fine longships. Beowulf, the hero, had made his land a place of peace and safety.

As the logs cracked and crisped, the firelight sparkled and danced in Beowulf's blue eyes. He turned to his closest companion Wiglaf and said,

'Cousin, this news troubles me much. King Hrothgar is a noble man and a good friend to the Geats. This beast Grendel must be stopped. We will go to Heorot'.

Beowulf selected a dozen of his bravest warriors to travel with him. They prepared their finest ship, a long, light, sleek craft, finely carved with eagles and dragons. They filled it with the sharpest of swords, axes and spears, together with beautifully-worked chainmail shirts and the strongest of iron-bound war shields.

At first light they pushed the boat down the shishing shingle beach into the whispering waves. As the blood-red sail was hoisted a mighty cry of 'Death to the monster Grendel' filled the dawn and echoed around the cliffs and across the bay. Beowulf was on his way.

Heorot Rebuilt

It was late afternoon on the day that Beowulf and his men arrived at Heorot and a sad sight met their eyes. The once-grand Hall now looked dark, broken and cold, but the warmth of the welcome from King Hrothgar gave everyone a sense of hope and purpose. Beowulf and the King hugged each other like a long-lost father and son. Friendship filled every heart.

'Noble king,' said brave Beowulf, 'we must rebuild Heorot immediately.'

'But, Grendel...' began the King.

'Forgive my interruption, kind sir,' Beowulf continued, 'but Grendel must not be allowed to crush the spirit of our Danish friends. I have come to put an end to this terror.'

'We all know of your brave deeds Beowulf, but Grendel is so powerful, he rips apart his victims with his terrible claws, eats their flesh and drinks their blood', cautioned the King. 'You have with you a company of gallant warriors with the finest armour and weapons, but I doubt that even this will be enough to beat this evil monster.'

'If Grendel fights with bare hands, then so shall I!' replied Beowulf, his eyes flashing fire.

So saying, our hero lifted off his gleaming battle helmet, lay down his razor-sharp sword and shining shield, and slipped from his silvery shirt of mail. A momentous cheer from everyone present, erupted into the air and threatened to shatter the fractured rafters of the Hall. King Hrothgar had his answer.

“Only the sharpest-eyed of owls noticed the ripples on the dark waters of one lonely swamp. Only the keenest of ears heard the rasping breath of something hugely horrible moving towards Heorot.”

For seven days, carpenters and craftsmen laboured from dawn until dusk to repair Heorot to its former glory. Once completed, King Hrothgar, his eyes filled with tears of pure joy, declared that there would be a great feast. In his heart, however, he was troubled, as he knew that the feast would likely have an unwelcome guest.

..... Grendel Returns

What a feast there was that night: the finest food and most marvellous mead. There was music and merriment, friendship and fun, tales, tricks and tumbling acrobats. Eyes shone, lips smiled and voices filled the air with laughter and song.

Only the sharpest-eyed of owls noticed the ripples on the dark waters of one lonely swamp. Only the keenest of ears heard the rasping breath of something hugely horrible moving towards Heorot.

The tables had been cleared in Heorot. Hrothgar had gone to his bed. Two sentries had been posted in front of the solid oak doors of the Hall. All other warriors had wrapped themselves in furs and blankets, curled in the warmth from the glowing embers of the fire and were dreaming of their homes or of their voyages to places far away. All warriors, that is, except for one - Beowulf.

True to his word, without weapons or armour, with only his ordinary clothes and a blanket for warmth, Beowulf sat in the shadows beneath a large and tangled shrub a short distance from the main doors of Heorot. Even the two sentries did not know he was there wide-awake in the darkness.

'I must protect my men,' thought Beowulf. 'They have followed me here because of a sense of duty, but I cannot put their lives at risk. I chose to come here and I will fight the dreadful monster alone.'

Slowly, but surely, Beowulf became aware of a sinister sound. Quietly at first, he heard the wheezing rasp of Grendel's breath and the squelching pad of his taloned toes coming nearer and nearer. The two sentries were talking quietly to each other about plans for their return home, so they were not aware of the huge, dark shape looming ever closer, red eyes blazing.

In an instant, Grendel was before them, rushing to catch them in his claws, but at the exact moment he would have torn them to pieces, brave Beowulf summoned all his courage and leaped from his cover, dived and pushed the men out of the monster's reach. Missing the men, Grendel's speed sent him smashing through the oaken doors of the Hall. The night air was filled with the crash of shattered wood and the furious howl of the thwarted Grendel.

Sleepers awoke and in the half-light they saw a monster that filled them with dread: a fearsome thing of talons and teeth, snarling and spitting, Grendel's long left arm and mighty hand shot out to grasp Beowulf's cousin, Wiglaf. Beowulf had fought giants and serpents in the past, but he had not realised just how big and fearsome Grendel would be. But he told himself that this was no time for fear, no moment for second thoughts and at the very second one of Grendel's terrible talons touched the skin on his cousin's neck, Beowulf courageously

“An eerie light that pulsed from glowing stalactites hanging down from the roof lighted the cavern. Never had air tasted so good to Beowulf – even the foul air of this gloomy and glimmering grotto. He swam slowly to the shore and walked wearily from the water.”

gripped Grendel's wrist with such strength it made the bones splinter and crack. Beowulf lunged at Grendel and swung with all his might. The astonished warriors watched as hero and monster hurtled back through the doorway, out into the darkness.

The screams and growls from Grendel were terrible to behold. Every time he tried to claw Beowulf with his free hand, the warrior wrenched with all his strength and swung the monster round. They bashed through bushes, tumbled through trees and splashed in the murky waters of the swamps. But brave Beowulf would not relent. His grip became stronger and stronger; his wrenching became fiercer and faster. Grendel's agonised shrieks of pain became shriller and sharper.

'You will not prevail!' yelled Beowulf and gave Grendel's arm a sudden sinew-splitting twist. There was a blood-chilling cracking and splintering of bone and tearing of flesh as Grendel's arm was wrenched from his body.

Dropping the monster's arm, Beowulf was ready for the next attack, but none came. Defeated, weakened from the loss of much blood streaming from his wound and howling in agony, Grendel retreated back across the miry moor, back to his loathsome lair. Back to die in a watery grave of rank weeds and murky mud. Beowulf had triumphed.

..... A New Terror

Three days after the death of Grendel a new terror stalked the land. Homes and farms were attacked in the depths of the night. No-one was safe in the hours of darkness. Grendel's mother, a giant she-hag, was seeking revenge for the death of her son.

'I am the cause of this new horror,' said Beowulf, 'and it is my duty to rid the land of this monster she-hag'.

'But you have already done so much for us,' said King Hrothgar. 'Nobody would blame you if you were to return home now and let my warriors and I deal with this monster.'

'Before I return home with my companions, I will ensure that all is peaceful once more.'

A watch was kept on the fields and farms every night. As the blood-red sun slowly sank behind the hills each evening, warriors roamed the lonely roads across the moors and mires. Then one morning, just before daybreak, the horror that was the she-hag was spied swimming in a sulphurous swamp – the entrance to her lair. The creature was huge and horrible. Every fibre of the air vibrated with the force of her fury. Onlookers shivered as she sank beneath the dark waters down to the secret cavern, where she spent the hours of daylight.

Each man was filled with dread, as one hour later, Beowulf was told of what they had seen. And so it was that at midday, when the sun was at its highest, courageous Beowulf stood on the very edge of the swamp. It gurgled and hissed blackly as if evil was escaping into the air from the dreadful depths below.

‘Because I slew Grendel, I am the cause of this monster’s evil actions. Therefore, I alone must put an end to this new slaughter,’ Beowulf told his men. ‘I cannot swim wearing armour, but I shall carry my trusty sword ‘Serpent-slayer’ with me.’

So saying, he took off his chainmail and waded into the water with only his sword for protection. He saw the fear and sorrow in his companions’ eyes. ‘Fear not, my brave band of brothers, for I shall return,’ he said: with that he took a deep breath and was gone.

Down and down brave Beowulf swam - deeper and deeper into the gloom. Down and down he went. Shimmering shafts of light pierced the water like ancient arrows fired by long-dead warriors. Down and down he went.

Suddenly, as if Beowulf had been grabbed by the strongest of invisible hands, he was pulled down into the depths, faster and faster. Beowulf could hear his heart knocking against his ribs. Desperately Beowulf held his breath. Faster and faster the current pulled him downwards in the darkness.

Just when Beowulf thought his lungs would explode, Beowulf burst through the surface of a dark pool at the centre of a vast cavern.

An eerie light that pulsed from glowing stalactites hanging down from the roof lighted the cavern. Never had air tasted so good to Beowulf – even the foul air of this gloomy and glimmering grotto. He swam slowly to the shore and walked wearily from the water. The floor of the cavern was covered by dozens of stony stalagmites sharp as swords.

Very slowly Beowulf’s eyes became accustomed to the gloom. He leaned back against the closest stalagmite that was as tall as he was and looked around. Beowulf thought that he was alone, but he still drew Serpent-slayer for protection. And as his eyes scanned the opposite side of the pitch-black pool, he saw something – or some Thing.

Watching Beowulf was a monstrous thing of shadows. It was an enormous shape-shifting she-hag. The creature’s hair looked like the slimiest seaweed, long and lank, straggling down over bony shoulders to scaly arms, or were they tentacles? How many tentacles were there? At times there appeared to be two... or were there four... or more?

And then Beowulf saw the monster’s eyes among the seaweed hair – hugely yellow with black slits for pupils. Eyes that burned and turned from yellow, to green, to brown and then black before becoming a scorching red in her flaming fury. Without warning and with frightening speed, a skidding tentacle streaked across the surface of the pool, snatched Beowulf’s sword and sent it spinning high into the cavern with such ferocity that its perfect sharpness pierced the rocky roof and impaled the sword far beyond Beowulf’s reach. And then the cavern reverberated to a gurgling roar. The she-hag was laughing. But there was no joy here.

‘You puny fool!’ she bellowed. ‘You dare to come into my lair.’

As she spoke the monster moved sinuously slowly – a slithering serpent slipping through the

dark waters. Her eyes burned into Beowulf's brain with such evil intensity he felt as if his spirit was being drained from him. But he did not look away. Beowulf matched the monster stare for stare.

'Take a long look at this lair, for it is the last sight that you will see in this world,' she howled.

The terrifying monster was now within a few feet of Beowulf. Still with his eyes firmly fixed on the monster's hideous face, Beowulf tried to take a step backwards, but he was stopped by the stalagmite behind him. The fearful beast was only centimetres away now. Beowulf was bathed in its baleful breath. The stagnant stench made his head spin, but Beowulf stood stock-still.

Slowly, very slowly, the she-hag opened her huge and hideous mouth. Her discoloured teeth, like great rusty scythes, curved upwards and downwards. Slowly, she drew her head backwards and upwards, ready to strike her victim. Beowulf's eyes were fixed on her every movement. Still the brave prince did not move.

In a blink, the monster struck. Her head streaked forward and downward to bite Beowulf in half.

Faster than an arrow, Beowulf threw himself to the floor. Instantly, he was up and he hurled himself at the back of the monster's head as it plunged down, open-mouthed onto the stalagmite that had been behind Beowulf.

There was a calamitous 'Crack!' as the stalagmite split the monster's skull.

The hideous horror was dead. Beowulf was victorious.

Afterword

There was such joy when Beowulf returned to Heorot, it cannot be put into mere words. Tears flowed as freely as the mead at the feasts that followed brave Beowulf's victory. Monsters never again troubled Hrothgar's land and the rafters rang with song every night in Heorot.

As for Beowulf, he returned home with his companions and later became king. He was a wise and kindly ruler who served his people well for many, many years. Ancient monsters never again troubled Beowulf. Until, that was, the day the dreadful dragon appeared.

But that, my friend, is a tale for another time.

Beowulf — Glossary

Characters

Beowulf	A warrior prince whose name means 'Bee-wolf' – a bear.
King Hrothgar	King of the Danes whose name means 'Famous spear'.
Wiglaf	Beowulf's cousin whose name means 'Survivor'.
Grendel	A dreadful giant whose name means 'Bone-grinder'.
Grendel's mother	A far more powerful monster – a giant shape-shifting she-hag.

The Story

Arctic lights	multi-coloured swirling lights in the sky (the northern lights)
baleful	threatening, menacing
Geats	pronounced 'Ye-ats' people from Geatland, part of Sweden
hart	a large male deer
livestock	farm animals
rafters	wooden beams holding up the roof
scythed	cut through
shape-shifting	capable of changing shape and size to confuse and frighten people
shield-maidens	warrior women who fought alongside men
tawny whale-road	the sea
Valhalla	in Norse mythology, Valhalla is an enormous hall ruled over by the god Odin