# Old Beowulf and the Dragon

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The Hoard of the Dragon

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*ow, clearly Beowulf could have cashed in on this victory. He could have gotten as much treasure as possible, and sailed it back to his uncle’s palace. He could have dove back down to the Grendelkin’s lair and brought up far more of the treasure. He could even, one imagines, have fulfilled the fears of Wealhtheow and possibly Unferth, and tried to become the richest, most powerful man in Heorot, perhaps even trying to rule after Hrothgar died.*

*But clearly Beowulf didn’t want any of this and just went home, returning Hrunting to Unferth with some very kind words, considering. In fact, Beowulf didn’t even keep what little treasure he brought back with him, but gave it all to his uncle.*

*To be fair, his uncle did then reward him with lands and wealth. And despite not really trying, one day Beowulf became king.*

The thin young red-haired man with the wispy beard was no great warrior. He knew he could not expect to be awarded gold rings and lands and fame. So when he started to get the worst end of a battle against some invading pirates, he was delighted to find an entrance to a cave in which to hide. And hide he did. But as he went in, he found that it was an entrance to a deep, underground cavern containing a sea of treasure. On the treasure hoard slept a dragon, in the manner of dragons. Wyrms gather the wealth, and they do not do business with others, or build things or buy things or help anyone. They simply lie upon the treasure and sleep like a spider in a web of gold and jewels.

So the man who was no great warrior thought to himself *What is the worst thing that could happen if I simply took one golden object? Burgled just one thing within close reach and ran off with it? How could a sleeping dragon miss one golden object taken from a sea of golden items?*

And this is what he did. He crept in, grabbed a bejewelled golden cup and ran off with this trophy.

Well, the dragon stirred in his sleep, awoke, uncoiled himself and smelled that someone fond of eating pork rinds had been near his hoard, and felt that it had been fooled with, and discerned also that a jeweled golden cup had been stolen. After the manner of dragons he burned with rage, his inner fire heated up white hot and began to pour out when he breathed, and pushing his way out through the larger, long-disused dragon exit, he burst from his treasure cavern into the world where an old man named Beowulf was king.

The dragon had no idea who had taken his cup, nor where he had gone, so what he did was quite simple: flying just above the treetops, he followed his nose to locate anywhere human beings lived, and when he found any house or barn, shed or mansion, he burned it. He was not a creature who spoke or argued. If he had a name, no one ever learned it. He simply took deep, angry breaths, swelling his ribs out, glowing blindingly white-hot from the fire within, and then he spat out long gouts of flame many times longer than his own immense, fully fifty-foot length. The dragon was so large he would not have comfortably fit in any mead-hall in the land.

In just a few hours, it seemed as if every single building of any kind for miles and miles was alight. It was only a matter of time before Beowulf’s great hall itself would be lit on fire too.

Soon enough, local politicians, spurred on by their people, showed up at Beowulf’s royal hall, demanding he tell them what he was going to do. Some strongly suggested Beowulf should offer the dragon the man who stole the treasure, with the treasure he had stolen, so the dragon could eat the man and take his treasure back. Maybe then, they felt, the dragon would be satisfied. Beowulf wasn’t sure. “There is no guarantee that would work, nor that we can find the one who stole from the dragon,” he growled, deep in thought.

Others argued passionately that the traditional and proper thing to do was to offer a beautiful young virginal woman to the dragon to do with as he wished. They insisted that dragons famously love beautiful young virginal women, and so it was worth a try. Some even seemed willing to provide names of specific young women they thought the dragon might like. “We’re not going to do that either,” Beowulf the king told them all, to their strict disapproval.

And no one was very pleased when Beowulf told them what he had actually decided to do. His hair and beard had been white for some time now, and though he still stood straight and strong, the truth was that he had grown a bit fat and quite slow. He mostly took long naps, especially during the cold weather.

Beowulf announced firmly, “This kingdom does not negotiate with dragons, and the only thing I know to do with monsters is kill them.” Then, over the objections of his court, he walked off stiffly and slowly to find a blacksmith who could make him a dragon-fighting shield.

One councillor to the king warned that in so doing, Beowulf might well be remembered as a brave warrior and mighty hero, but as a very bad king. “A king’s proper place is on his throne,” the man said.

But Beowulf had already left.

Every war-shield anyone had ever seen was always a circular, thick, sturdy piece of wood just large enough that one could almost have hidden behind it curled up into a ball. Some of the more brutal bucklers had iron nails hammered into them to turn aside blades, an iron spike sticking out of the middle to stab people with, or a border of iron around the edge to smash people’s swords and axes aside while stabbing them over it with the other hand. But every single one was made of wood.

With many of the wooden structures in his kingdom in flames, Beowulf did not want to hold up a wooden shield to protect him from dragonfire. So he had a smith quickly make him a very large, impossibly heavy shield of solid iron. There was no time to make it into a perfect circle, or decorate it with the king’s crest, so it was just a large, thick rectangular plate with a handle on the back.

“Do you want leather straps on the back to put your arm through?” the smith asked.

But Beowulf wanted the whole thing to be made of iron. And so the smith attached an iron handle to the back as Beowulf went off to collect his war gear, which had been hanging up as wall ornaments of historical value for some years.

The smith himself, though a strong, young man, found he had serious difficulty lifting the iron shield once it was done, and he doubted his old king would be able to stand upright with it. Beowulf had survived many battles and adventures since Heorot, but he was now as old as anyone’s grandfather, though he himself had no children.

Beowulf came back to collect his shield wearing the fancy gold-decorated helmet Hrothgar had given him many decades before, and his repaired mail shirt, bearing his mighty sword Naeling. He grabbed the thick iron shield and picked it up just as if it was merely made of solid oak. And then, on horseback with eleven men, he headed off to where the worst of the burning was said to be going on.

They had not got far before a young man stopped them and admitted that it had been he who had started all of the trouble by stealing a cup from the dragon’s hoard. He pressed the gold goblet into his king’s hand, and then tried to leave. As he did, Beowulf’s iron grip closed on his shoulder.

“Wait. We are going to need you to lead us to the dragon’s hoard now,” the monster hunter snarled, not unkindly. “We cannot fly to keep up with him, so the thing I always do is put myself where he is headed, as I did at Heorot, or where he lives, as I did with Grendel’s mother. I do not know where he is headed, unless it is to find you. So why not put you where he lives? If one man stealing one cup has enraged the malicious monster so much that he is setting fire to half of my kingdom, how quickly will he fly if all thirteen of us threaten his hoard entire?”

And so they rode with the young man who was not a brave warrior, directly to where the hoard was. It took them two hours to get there on horseback. The place was a small cave entrance surrounded by looming cliffs and scrub brush. Then they waited.

Final Showdown

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*hen we are old, we can and often do travel in our thoughts to the time of our youth. To the time when our legs were strong and our backs did not hurt and our eyes and wits were sharp and quick as cat’s teeth.*

*While they waited for the dragon, no doubt Beowulf thought about when he had been an orphan boy of seven, a wild, clumsy little creature. Back then, the king of the Geats had been an aging hero figure named Hrethel. Grey-haired Hrethel had adopted little Beowulf, who was his grand-nephew, and treated him exactly as he treated his own sons Herebald, Hæthcyn and Higelac, even though Beowulf’s name did not start with an “h.” Needless to say, Hrethel the hero-king made a strong impression upon little Beowulf.*

*When the boys had grown into teens, though, Hrethel faced an impossible situation. His own boys, always more eager to learn how to use weapons than their younger kinsman Beowulf was, spent the afternoon shooting horn bows that were perhaps too powerful for them to use properly. They had been warned that the bows were too dangerous for them to use unsupervised. Being boys, they used the bows nonetheless. And, improperly supervised and not wearing safety equipment, Hæthcyn accidentally shot his brother Herebald through the eye and his brother Herebald died.*

*You have no doubt heard about this one before, purely as an ethical problem: Hrethel’s Dilemma. Accident or no, King Hrethel is now duty-bound to avenge the death of his son Herebald by killing Hæthcyn, his son’s killer, but also his son. How can he avenge the loss of his son by killing another of his sons, and in so doing, lose twice as many? Yet Hrethel is doubly duty-bound, as king, to punish the death of one of his subjects. A life has been taken, and must needs be repaid in blood.*

*If only it had been a stranger, preferably from another country, who had killed his son, the one house could have fought a bloody battle with the other to get satisfaction, and the blood of the son could have been washed away in the ensuing flood of battle gore. But, due to one accident, both sons die, one with an arrow through the eye at the hand of his brother, and the other, upon the gallows, must surely die at the hand of his father the king.*

*But this does not seem to be what happened. Hrethel, stuck in this situation, did not kill his son Hæthcyn, despite the famous Dilemma. Nevertheless, not many years later, when the Geats engaged a faction of the Swedes in battle, Hæthcyn fell at Ravenswood. And so, when sorrowing, grey-haired Hrethel was no more, the only member of his house left in line to be king was Higelac, the remaining son. And so Higelac became king, and did his best to be a father figure to young Beowulf.*

*Makes you think, doesn’t it?*

By the time the dragon could be seen, a rapidly-growing speck in the sky, Beowulf was psyching himself up for battle. “I killed the *nicras* in my swimming contest with Breca. I killed Grendel and his mother both, and numerous sea creatures beside. I killed Dæghrefn, Knight of the Hugmen before anyone else could. I braved in my younger days battles too many to count. And I will kill this creature. He will face me, and me only. You men go and witness the fight from those trees over there where you will be safe. When I am done, you shall have a share in the treasure, though you shall have to help carry it.”

And with this, Beowulf the king said goodbye to each of his men, and sent them to hide from the imminent Serpent in the tree line. And they all hid in the trees while the dragon flew in like a flung stone, and vanished from their sight behind a stretch of cliffs. Somehow they knew the beast was checking on his treasure trove.

Then white-haired Beowulf ranged around, walking stiffly and carrying his heavy iron shield in his uncanny grip, until he found the larger entrance the dragon had used. And when he found it, he called out to the dragon in a loud voice to come out of the cave and face him. This call reverberated off the cliff faces like the peal of a trumpet. And then Beowulf rested the large, rectangular shield on the ground, and braced it from behind, holding long, thick Naeling ready in his free hand.

Coiling and uncoiling in fury, belly heating up with molten wrath, the beast erupted from his cavern, and every man who had come with Beowulf held tight with terror to his tree, scarcely daring to peer around it at the ensuing dragon fight.

The dragon blasted out gouts of flame until the shield Beowulf sheltered behind began to glow red with heat. Not wanting to be cooked alive, the mighty hero lifted his shield before him, planted his feet and unleashed a world-ending downward blow at the flame-spewing head when the dragon grew incautious enough to put his head within the range of Beowulf’s swordreach. Never had a sword been swung with half so much power or speed, despite the age of the swordsman. Nealing was a strong, well-made weapon of renown that had never let Beowulf down. The blade stuck the beast squarely across the forehead.

And the sword rebounded from the dragon’s skull, completely failing to bite into it.

Beowulf rested his shield on the ground and took refuge behind it as the dragon vomited ever more flame at it and it began to cook Beowulf’s arm like a cod on a campfire.

Welcome Help From Wiglaf

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*ow, of course you know of Wiglaf, distant kin of Beowulf, and you know he was one of the men who was there that day, my sister-son, hiding in the trees. And of course it absolutely vital at this point to pause for a moment to remember Wiglaf’s sword and where it came from. How could we do otherwise?*

*Eanmund, son of forgiving Ohthere famously had no friends. This is because he’d angered everyone and was eventually left wandering friendless, as an exile. Even his family would have nothing more to do with him. In his travels, exiled Eanmund encountered a distant kinsman of Beowulf’s named Weohstan, and Eanmund had no friends nor relatives left to defend him when he angered Weohstan. So Weohstan, annoyed with Eanmund, exiled son of forgiving Ohthere, killed him in battle, and took his sword and armour, all of his well-made battle-gear, to return them to Eanmund’s relatives.*

*Eanmund’s equally forgiving uncle Onela told Weohstan that, as far as the family was concerned, Weohstan had earned Eanmund’s battle gear fairly and honourably, and was very welcome to it. This was very forgiving, as they would certainly have been justified in killing Weohstan and his entire family for killing one of their own sons. But this was not their way.*

*And so Weohstan kept the fine battle-gear, and remained on good terms with Ohthere, Onela and their family. The sword Weohstan now carried was never used to kill a brother, and had, in fact, been won fairly and bequeathed to Weohstan in good will.*

*And Weohstan had a son, and he raised him well, teaching him about doing things right, and this paying off in the end. And when young Wiglaf was old enough to carry it in battle, Weohstan very seriously gave him the sword of Eanmund and told him to always be a faithful kinsman and retainer.*

*Wiglaf had learned how to wield a sword, but the confrontation with the dragon was his first battle helping out his distant relative King Beowulf.*

*And what a battle it was.*

Wiglaf cowered in the treeline with the others, right where his kin/king had sent them all. He did as he was told and stayed there, but once the others started to flee to the forest, running away entirely, Wiglaf gave them a stern lecture, while the stench of dragonfire rose in their nostrils:

“I remember when we drank the king’s mead and promised him who gave us our gold rings and swords, helmets and spears that we would always be there for him, to back him up when he needed us. Look at how we’re breaking that promise! He chose us and gave us what we’re now running away with, leaving him all alone when he needs us like never before. Let’s return back and help him! I’d rather die here than go home wearing this ring and this fine helmet, bearing this shield, and tell people we left our king here to die. I’d rather burn!” And with these fine words, Wiglaf turned from the forest and began making his way back to where his king was being roasted by the dragon.

Everyone else ran away.

Wiglaf held his yellow wooden shield high, helmet down low on his forehead, and strode carefully over to where Beowulf and the dragon faced each other. Beowulf simply hid behind the glowing shield, and the dragon seemed determined to slowly, torturously burn Beowulf alive, in the manner of cruel dragons. In fact, the shield had begun to melt with the heat, and Beowulf would never be able to use his left arm and hand again.

Wiglaf strode up and stood beside his king, holding up his extremely flammable wooden shield, and said quietly “Do you remember when I was a bit younger and you told me that you would never back down? That the thing to do was to keep moving forward? Well, now is the time for you to remain true to those words. Now is the time for you to show the world that you are every bit the hero you once were. I am here to help you do it.”

Emboldened by Wiglaf’s words, Beowulf let the melting iron shield fall to the ground smoking and running with ironmelt, and stood behind Wiglaf’s wooden shield, knowing it would soon burst into ash. The two kinsmen advanced through the flames to bring themselves within reach of the dragon, who was keeping his distance, and Beowulf readied himself for another overhand sword strike like the first one. The old king pivoted with a quickness one wouldn’t have believed possible at his age, and brought Naeling crashing down on the dragon’s head even harder than he had before.

And Naeling shattered into three pieces which lay on the ground, quietly ringing with the impact.

The dragon leapt forward at this point and grabbed Beowulf by the neck like a mighty dog catches a rat. The dragon’s teeth closed around the golden neckband that Queen Wealhtheow of Heorot had given him, and flooded Beowulf’s veins with black, smoking venom. If not for the metal torc, the creature might well have torn the king’s throat out.

Wiglaf, still holding up his scorched wooden shield, struck at the dragon with the sword his father had given him, slashing for the creature’s eyes and throat.

Incredibly, the dragon dropped the dying king and backed up for a moment, seeing a fire in Wiglaf’s eyes every bit as hot as his own, for Wiglaf was overwhelmed with love for his kinsman and king and determined to protect him and finish what he had started.

And Wiglaf raised his wooden shield to protect his head and advanced on the dragon, leaving Beowulf on the ground. The dragon sent out a gout of flame, and Wiglaf’s shield burst into flame. He dropped it, his left arm scorched and useless, and drove his sword into an expanse of underbelly that was exposed to him, partly pinning a coil of the dragon’s abdomen to the earth for a moment. The dragon screamed like a colossal brass instrument and began spewing flames everywhere, and coiling and uncoiling in an attempt to free itself, only wounding itself further on the sword that Wiglaf held firm with all his might and twisted in its guts.

Looking like death itself, Beowulf got up on one quivering knee, drew the battle-knife he always carried, and approached. Wiglaf made room for Beowulf, while keeping the creature pinned. Beowulf’s knife opened the beast up from where Wiglaf’s sword had gone in, right across its body, and scalding, flame-glowing entrails spilled out, steaming and hissing on the pine needles under their feet.

Then between the two of them, Beowulf with his wide-bladed knife and Wiglaf his kinsman with his famous sword, gutted the creature entirely. Slowly, the hot glow of flame that had burned inside the creature, and in the guts that now lay all around them, faded and cooled.

The king, however, was heating up now. The venom continued to burn hot and black in his veins, and the wounds on his neck steamed with the heat of it. Wiglaf lay Beowulf down under a pine tree, removed his scorched helmet and tried to clean the wound as best he could with the clean cloths he carried to treat battle wounds.

Beowulf spoke. “I wish I had a son, to give him my battle-gear. This kingdom I have governed for fifty cold winters, and no king of any neighboring country dared take me on, or try to threaten us in any way. And I did as I was told, and sought no monsters to slay, and stayed at home while my hair grew gradually grey and then white. No man can accuse me now of brother-slaying or breaking my word in all of that time. I am able to find peace in this, though I am dying with the kiss of the wyrm. Now one final thing before I make an end: I would like to see some of this treasure we have won today at such cost. I would like to gaze on it with my own eyes, the gold, the art, the gemstones,” he said.

And Wiglaf ran into the hoard, hoping to bring something back to show his king before he died. The space was large, and carpeted with treasure up to Wiglaf’s knees. Now that the dragon was dead, the place looked empty, like a golden, gem-studded husk. Wiglaf scooped up a bright banner, and vases, urns and cups, filling them with jewels and coins.

He came back out with them clutched to his chest. He began handing cups and vases overflowing with glittering treasure to his dying lord, where he lay under the tree.

King Beowulf’s eyes grew misty as he handled the treasure and he said “This treasure... I am thankful that I have gained it to give to my people, fairly won. I have traded the last of my fading life for it, and I hope I will always be remembered as he who gave it to his people. Some of the heroes of my people have been returned to the sea in a ship when they die, but I want a barrow. I want you to finish what the dragon began and burn me on a high place that will be seen from the sea by passing ships. Raise a towering tomb for my remains up there, that will stand as a landmark that sailors can navigate by, and a warning to avoid the rocks as they sail.”

And Beowulf reached up and took off the golden torc that Queen Weahtheow of Heorot had given him in his youth, and handed it to Wiglaf. Next he gave to his young kinsman, as if to a son, his helmet and other battle-gear. With his last breath, the dying king said in a whisper, hoarse with venom, “All of our other kin have been carried by fate away from us before now. I must follow them, leaving you, who are the last of us.”

And Beowulf died. As Wiglaf knelt looking down at the body of a burned, weaponless, armourless old man, the men who had fled into the forest began to come back out, to see if it was safe and if there was any treasure for them.

I will leave it up to you to imagine what Wiglaf, his left arm blacked and twisted like a crow’s claw, had to say to all of them, as they laughed with joy and bravely drank mead from jeweled cups taken from the dragon’s hoard, standing around the massive corpse.

All Stories In The End

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*o Beowulf died, after keeping his people safe for his whole life, before he was king, and also throughout his reign. And after him, the Geatish people faded from prominence very quickly. You well know how few of them are left now, and how the Scylfings swept in and took over their land and goods.*

*Beowulf went the way of Hraethcyn, of Higelac, of Ongentheow, and all of the others. Some day they will all be forgotten entirely, and become as nameless and faceless as will you and I, as far as the children of the future are concerned.*

*You know someone is truly gone and lacking all present importance when they have been turned into a mere story to tell while men drink by the fire. They are gone, and they and their people have no further role to play in things. But we aren’t quite ready to forget them. And so we put them into stories to tell before we sleep.*

*Some day no one will know the name of Beowulf, nor the tale of his prowess and courage. First we are men, and if we are lucky, for a time after that we become tales. And once our tales have grown tedious and out of fashion, not even that.*

*In the end, we become lost tales, every one of us.*