



BEOWULF

A NEW TELLING · BY ROBERT NYE

LONG AGO, THE KING OF THE Danes was a bold man named Hrothgar. When he was just a boy, he had killed a bear with his bare hands. He did not brag about it. But poets sang about it all over the land. And when he was king, men rushed to join his army.

One day Hrothgar told his men, "I had a dream about a feasting hall. It was bigger than any other hall in the world. The walls and floors were made of ivory. I shall have such a hall, and I shall call it Heorot."

So Heorot was built. It stood on the edge of a misty swamp. Hrothgar invited all the war lords in the land to celebrate the opening of Heorot's doors.

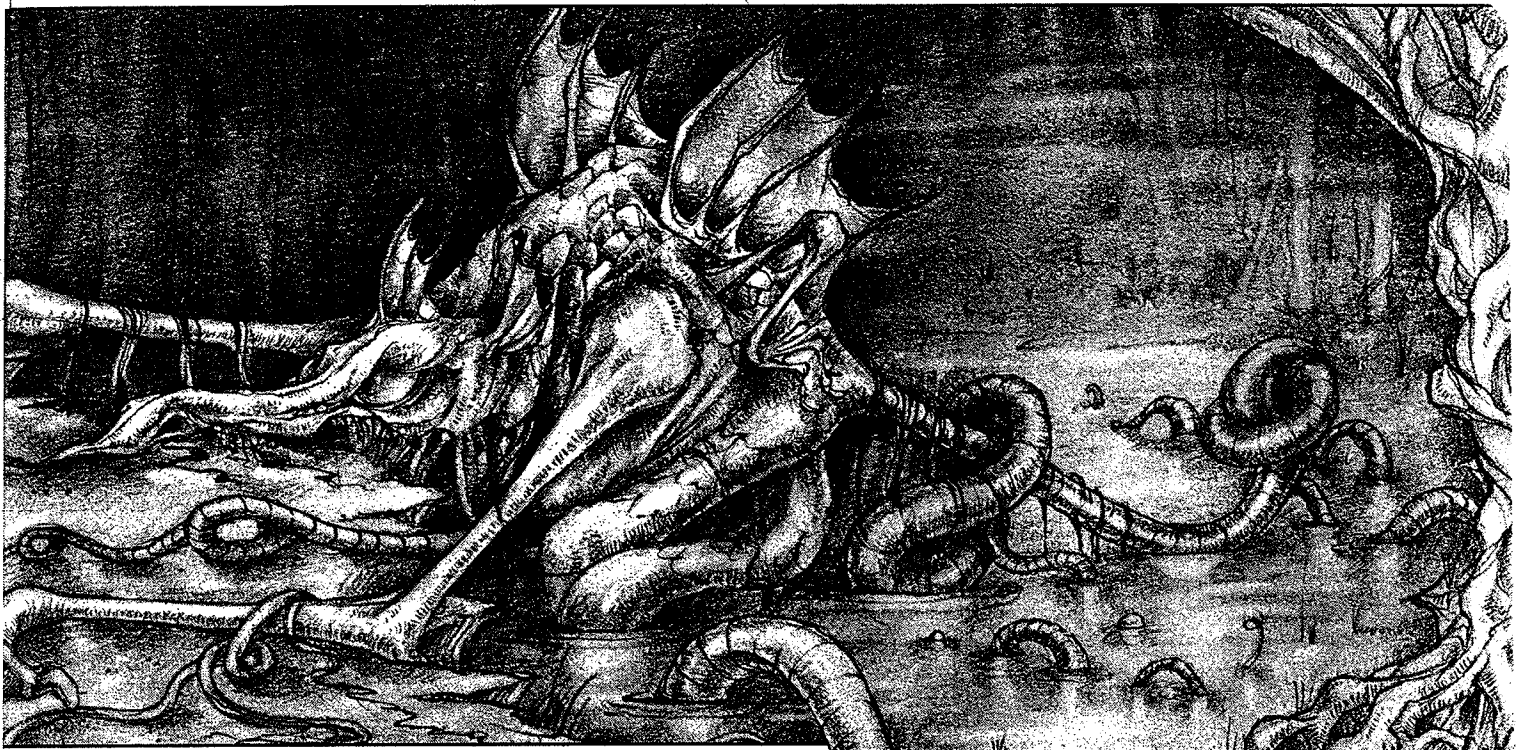
At the feast there was a good deal of eating and drinking, singing and laughter. Afterwards, thirty of the king's guards stayed in the

hall. Their job was to watch out for enemies. But they were so tired from the feast that they soon fell asleep.

Out in the dark swamp, something stirred. It was cruel and slimy. Its eyes shone green. It left a trail of blood where it crawled because it fed on living things. And it was so greedy that bits of creatures it had eaten dripped from its lips. Its claws were red with blood, and its breath smelled of death.

"Grendel!" hissed the wind. "Grendel! Grendel!"

The creature Grendel dragged himself toward Hall Heorot.



When morning came, the king woke up from a terrible dream. "My lovely hall was full of blood!" he cried.

"It was only a dream, master," his servants said.

"Go down into the hall," the king insisted. "Then come back and tell me what you have seen."

The servants laughed as they went down the great stairway. Halfway down, they stopped and started shaking with fright.

There was no sign of the king's guards. And the ivory floors and walls of the great hall were dripping with blood.

HROTHGAR WAS angry as he watched the servants scrub the blood from the hall. His wife, the queen, said, "Who could have done this terrible thing?"

"I don't know," said Hrothgar. "But when I find them, I'll make them pay with their own blood."

Unferth, a rude and drunken fellow, was standing nearby. He said to Hrothgar, "You'll never

have revenge, because this was not done by humans. Your guards were eaten alive by Grendel!"

"I've never believed the stories about Grendel," the queen said. "They're told just to frighten children. Nobody believes in that kind of thing anymore."

"I do," snapped Unferth. "Grendel is the wickedest thing that ever crawled in darkness. He is made of hatred. He is greedy for human blood. He is the enemy of all good things, and —"

"That's enough," said Hrothgar. "There's no need to sound as if you enjoy it so much."

"Grendel did this," Unferth said with a smile. "I know it."

"I believe you do," Hrothgar said. "It takes an evil nose to smell the devil."

The queen said, "If this is true, Grendel must be angry at the happiness here in Hall Heorot."

"That's right," Unferth sneered. "Grendel will be back."

"Let him come," said the

king. "I shall wait for him with the nine bravest warriors in the land."

The nine warriors came at the king's call. They sharpened their swords. They put grease on their armor in order to slip through Grendel's grasp.

Night came. Unferth leaned from a tower to look out over the swamp. Hrothgar and his warriors waited in the great hall.

The king's eyes never left the door of the hall. He and his men waited with their swords in hand. But they had no chance against Grendel.

One moment, the thick door was standing. The next moment, it was down — and Grendel was upon them.

Hrothgar could not remember exactly what happened next. Swords flashed and blood ran. Man after man went into those terrible jaws. Torches went out as Grendel came past them. Soon the hall was pitch black. And the only sound was the crunching of bones.

On a floor high above, the queen screamed. Unferth had fainted, either from fear or excitement. A burning torch had fallen out of his hand. As it came rolling down the stairs, the queen caught it. Then she threw it down into the darkness where the monster was.

It missed Grendel, but it fell next to the king, who was lying on the floor. The torch made Hrothgar's armor shine in the dark like a holy light. Perhaps this is what stopped Grendel.

The queen flew downstairs and threw herself upon her husband. She thought he was dead. She kissed him, then fainted.

When she woke up, the king was wounded, but alive. Unferth looked disappointed.

HROTHGAR'S poets told the story of Grendel wherever they went. One of them told it in the court of Hygelac, king of the Geats. The poet added that Hall Heorot was now empty at night, for fear of Grendel.

Now, King Hygelac had a nephew whose name was Beowulf. Although Beowulf was young, he was already famous for his goodness and daring. He also had a way of seeing things that other people missed.

Yet Beowulf's eyes were not strong. As a small boy, he liked to play with bees. (Beowulf means "bee hunter.") And one

day an angry swarm stung his eyelids badly. After that, he could not see very well. But he developed great insight. He could truly *see* what others only *looked at*.

Beowulf was strong because he was good. He was good because he was strong enough to accept his weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

When Beowulf heard about Grendel, he decided to help Hrothgar. He chose fourteen brave men to join him. After sailing for two days, they came to the land of the Danes.

One of Hrothgar's coast guards questioned them. Beowulf explained why they were there.

"I will take you to the king," the coast guard said. "But your little army cannot win against Grendel. Fighting that monster is like fighting the sea."

"Thank you for the advice," said Beowulf. "But we shall try."

"You are either the bravest man in the world or a fool," said the guard. "I will lead you to Hall Heorot."

As soon as Beowulf saw Heorot, he thanked the guard and led his men on alone. The guard watched until they were far away. Then he was shocked to see that Beowulf had left his sword behind.

HROTHGAR WELcomed Beowulf without much hope. "Go home," the king said. "There's nothing you can do."

Beowulf sat down by the king's throne and bit into an apple. "These apples are good," he said. "Do you want one?"

"Where do they grow?" the king asked.

Beowulf described the valley where his men had found the apples. And he gave one to the king.

"That grove is the work of a

wicked witch," the king said.

Unferth grinned and said, "An old witch spat out her teeth there. Then they grew into apple trees. Only someone wicked could eat them and come to no harm."

Beowulf finished eating his apple and laughed. "You think that bad brings forth only bad. But even wicked people can do good. Truly good people find good where they can."

"So, you're truly good, are you?" sneered Unferth.

"No," said Beowulf. "Like your witch, I have some bad teeth."

"You talk in riddles and rot," Unferth said.

The queen said, "Beowulf means that to overcome evil, we must admit that we have a bit of it in ourselves. He admits his weaknesses, so they become strengths."

"I guess I agree with you," said the king. "But I don't understand this apple business."

"Just eat your apple," said the queen.

The king took a bite. He admitted, "It's fine and ripe."

Beowulf said, "Now about Grendel —"

"What about Breca, your friend?" Unferth cut in. "You tried to drown him because he was a better swimmer than you."

"That is not true," Beowulf said calmly. "Breca and I loved swimming. We made a dare to swim into the sea, each with a sword in hand, until one of us gave up. We swam for five days. Then a storm drove us apart."

"Nine sea monsters attacked me, one after another. I swung my sword and managed to kill them all. When the storm died down, I reached shore and rested. Later I learned that Breca had not drowned. The sea had carried him to Norway. He was a better swimmer than I."

The king was impressed with Beowulf's honesty and bravery.

He held a feast in his honor.

At the feast the king said, "Beowulf, if anyone can kill Grendel, it is you. But where is your sword?"

"I left it behind," said Beowulf. "Have swords been any good against Grendel so far? My hands are weapons enough."

The king thought Beowulf was crazy. But the queen told her husband not to worry.

By now it was growing dark: As the Danes began to leave the feasting hall, Unferth surprised them by saying, "I'm going to stay. I want to see what happens when Beowulf tries to shake hands with Grendel."

BEOWULF'S MEN were tired and soon fell asleep around the hall. Only Unferth and Beowulf stayed awake. For hours, there was no sign of Grendel.

Then, just before dawn, there was a hissing noise outside the door. Beowulf stood up and cried, "Grendel, I am Beowulf and not afraid of you! I have come to kill you!"

The monster squealed with rage and tore down the door.

The smell of Grendel hit Beowulf like a wave of rotting matter. Then he saw coil after coil of skin that was smeared with blood. Two green eyes glared, and huge claws reached out.

Before Beowulf could move, Grendel snatched up one of the warriors and tore him apart. He lapped up the blood, gulped down the flesh, and crunched up the bones.

Unferth was sick to his stomach. He looked for a hiding place, but there was none. The torches went out as Grendel went past them.

The hall was now almost completely dark. Grendel gurgled with glee. He felt at home in darkness.



Then, suddenly, he was stopped by light. It had him by the claw. It was Beowulf.

Since Grendel was made of evil, Beowulf's goodness burned him. It felt as if ten red-hot nails were being driven into his skin.

"I do not fear you," Beowulf said. "That's why I do not fight you. Your own evil will destroy you. You must die because you cannot stand the light."

Grendel shook his arm about and hit it against the wall. Beowulf was badly bruised, but he held on. Then Grendel started

to back away. There was a snapping of bones and a tearing of muscles. Then blood flowed everywhere.

Grendel's arm had been pulled out of its socket.

THE MONSTER howled and dragged himself off to the swamp. He knew he was going to bleed to death. And Beowulf let him go.

The sun came up and Beowulf's men crowded around him. When he hung Grendel's

arm from a hook in the ceiling, they cheered.

But Unferth snarled at Beowulf, "You're a murderer! He was beautiful and you killed him!"

Beowulf's men wanted to hang Unferth for that remark. But Beowulf told them to leave him alone.

"To Unferth, Grendel *was* beautiful," he explained.

The king was amazed by what Beowulf had done. He ordered a feast to celebrate the death of Grendel. And the queen gave Beowulf a gold ring and a gold collar.

The feast went on for three days and three nights. Only Unferth did not take part. He sat in a corner and muttered about Grendel's "beauty."

Finally, everyone fell asleep in the feasting hall. Now that Grendel was dead, they felt safe. Only Unferth stayed awake. He stared at the arm which hung from the hook.

IN THE DARKEST dark of the darkness, something stirred in the swamp. It was shaped like a snake. But it moved faster than a snake because it had tentacles. They pulled it through the mud as quickly as a knife cuts through butter. The flesh was greasy, and blood dripped from its mouth.

She had no name. She was simply Grendel's mother.

Unferth knew that something terrible was coming, but he longed for it. He did not belong here with people who believed that goodness was stronger than evil. He belonged with Grendel.

Grendel had not tried to kill him. Grendel had wanted to take him off to where he belonged. Fear had held Unferth back. But Unferth was no longer afraid.

Grendel's mother came into Hall Heorot without a sound. She saw Unferth and smiled.

Unferth stretched out his arms and said, "Welcome."

In the morning the king saw that Grendel's arm was gone from the hook. He also found his best friend dead — with a dagger in his back.

"Grendel must have done this!" Hrothgar cried out.

Beowulf studied the dagger in the dead man's back. "This is Unferth's dagger," he said.

"He shall die for this," Hrothgar said. "Guards! Find Unferth and bring him to me!"

Unferth could not be found. But the guards found some strange tracks leading into the swamp.

The king said, "Unferth is out in the swamp, drooling over the monster's arm."

"I don't think he took Grendel's arm," Beowulf said. "He wasn't strong enough to take it down without dropping it and waking us."

"You speak as though he were dead," said the queen.

"I'd be surprised if he is not," said Beowulf. "Something came out of the swamp for Grendel's arm. It took Unferth, too. Is there another monster out there? Is there something more terrible than Grendel that moves like a snake?"

"There is only one thing," said the queen. "She has no name. She is Grendel's mother."

BEOWULF RODE A white horse into the swamp. He followed the strange tracks, and his men followed him. He wore the gold collar that the queen had given him. And he carried a sword as sharp as a flame.

The awful smell of the swamp made Beowulf cough. He saw many bones along the way.

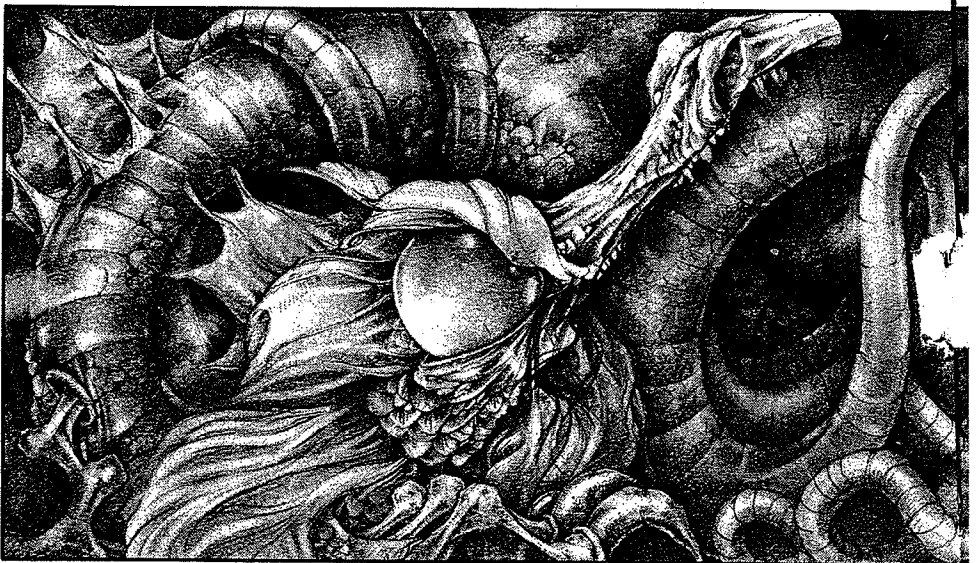
The strange tracks ended at the edge of a pool that bubbled with blood. Beside the pool was a tree. Hanging from its only branch was Unferth's head.

"Bury Unferth's head," Beowulf told his men. "He was a man to be pitied."

Beowulf stared at the blood bubbling in the pool. He guessed it must be Grendel's blood. And he guessed that Grendel's mother was down there, too.

"Wait here for me two days and two nights," he told his men. "If I do not return by then, I shall be dead. Do not risk your lives to look for me."

His men looked frightened. But Beowulf laughed before diving into the pool.



DOWN HE WENT, deeper and deeper. The water was thick with blood and slime. Oddly enough, he could breathe the bubbles of air in the blood.

He swam with his eyes shut. When he finally opened them, he saw a gleam of light below him. Soon it was all around him. The light came off the wings of huge moth-like creatures. The cloud of them was so thick that he had to cut his way through them with his sword.

She was waiting. She made no noise. Her tentacle arms looked like part of the water, and Beowulf fell into them. He struggled to get free, but he could not.

She began to drag him down. Beowulf began to panic. She could easily choke him. But suddenly he was gulping great breaths of air. She had dragged him down to her den. By some kind of witchcraft, the slimy liquid did not enter here.

Beowulf reached for his sword and managed to swing at the tentacles that held him. But the blade just bounced off her skin. So he threw the sword away.

She kept on dragging him into the heart of her den. He could hear her laughing and making swallowing sounds. Her

arms kept winding about him like snakes.

Beowulf screamed with fright. And the scream brought him to his senses. He stopped struggling. He let himself go limp in her arms.

★ Grendel's mother did not laugh now. She sensed danger.

"I am Beowulf, who killed Grendel," he said. "I am not afraid of what you can do because I know myself. There is evil in me, but I do not let it out. I can put fear to use. I can find courage from fear itself."

Grendel's mother still dragged him, but much more slowly now. Her magic was going.

"You are powerless against the power in me," Beowulf said. "You can see it shining in the gold collar around my neck."

He wrapped his hands around one of her tentacles. He stared into her terrible eyes without blinking. And he kept on tightening his grip.

"I am Beowulf, who knows himself," he chanted. "Sleep. Sleep deep and never wake up."

She slept. Gently, Beowulf put his hands around her neck and strangled her. She did not fight. Her tentacles fell down like useless ropes. Her body began to melt. She was dead.

BEOWULF looked behind the melted figure that had once been Grendel's mother. He saw a huge sword, which he picked up. When he ran his finger along the blade, it made a sound like singing.

He heard a voice, as if in answer to the sword. It sounded like Grendel. But Grendel was dead.

It was Grendel's corpse, with one arm torn out, that answered the song of the sword.

The corpse sprang at Beowulf. Beowulf swung the giant sword with both hands. Grendel's dead head was cut from his dead body. Black blood gushed out and melted the giant blade as if it were an icicle.

The corpse fell where its mother had melted. Only her eyes were left. Beowulf stamped on the eyes, picked up Grendel's head, and left the den.

Soon Beowulf burst through the pool's surface with a shout. He held Grendel's head up high.

His men were too surprised to cheer at first. But as they helped Beowulf from the pool, the swamp rang with shouts of joy.

It took four men to carry Grendel's head on long spears to Heorot. Beowulf rode behind them, and everyone sang.

When the king and queen saw the warriors returning, they rode out to greet them. And they wept for joy when Beowulf told them what had happened.

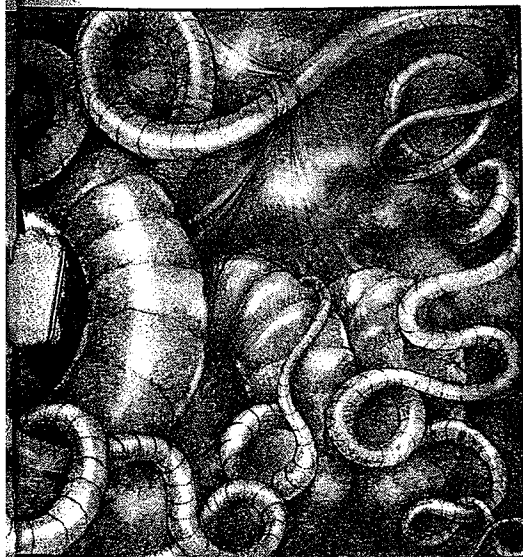
"Everyone who lives or will live in this land will honor your name," said the king. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The queen noticed that Beowulf seemed to be in pain. "Are you wounded?" she asked him.

Beowulf laughed and said, "All this excitement has given me a toothache."

THE NEXT DAY, Beowulf woke up to the grim cry of a raven. "Welcome the morning in any way you can," he told the bird. "You sound as bad as my tooth feels."

Suddenly the raven sang three beautiful notes. And suddenly Beowulf's toothache was gone. (Continued on page 12)



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But Beowulf felt sad. This was not his country. He told the king that he wanted to go home.

"I love you like a son," the king said. "Why not stay here, where you are famous?"

But the queen said, "His fame goes wherever he goes. Go home, Beowulf, with our blessings."

The king gave Beowulf the most precious jewels he owned. When he said good-bye, tears ran down his face.

The coast guard came to meet Beowulf and his men. "I am glad you did not take my advice," he said. "I warned you not to fight Grendel."

"But I followed some of your advice," Beowulf said.

"What do you mean?"

"You told me that fighting Grendel was like fighting the sea. Nobody ever took a sword to kill the sea, so I left my sword behind."

They soon reached home. And when they did, Beowulf knelt down and kissed the ground.



A FEW YEARS passed in peace. Beowulf lived quietly, keeping bees.

Then the land was attacked by Swedes. King Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle, was killed. And when Hygelac's son was also killed, Beowulf was made king.

Beowulf could not rest until the murders of his uncle and cousin were avenged. So he planned an attack against the king of Sweden. The fighting was fierce, but the king of Sweden was killed. Now all the kingdoms of the north could live in friendship.

Beowulf enjoyed peace for the next fifty years. He was now an old man. His beard was white, and he was nearly blind.

But he still tended bees. There was order and beauty in their world, which he loved.

But there was one person in the land who was not happy. He was a slave whose master had threatened to whip him for doing something wrong. And he had run away to the mountains to hide.

Now, princes had been buried in one of these mountains long ago. Great treasures had been buried with them. People thought it was best to leave these places alone. But the slave was desperate.

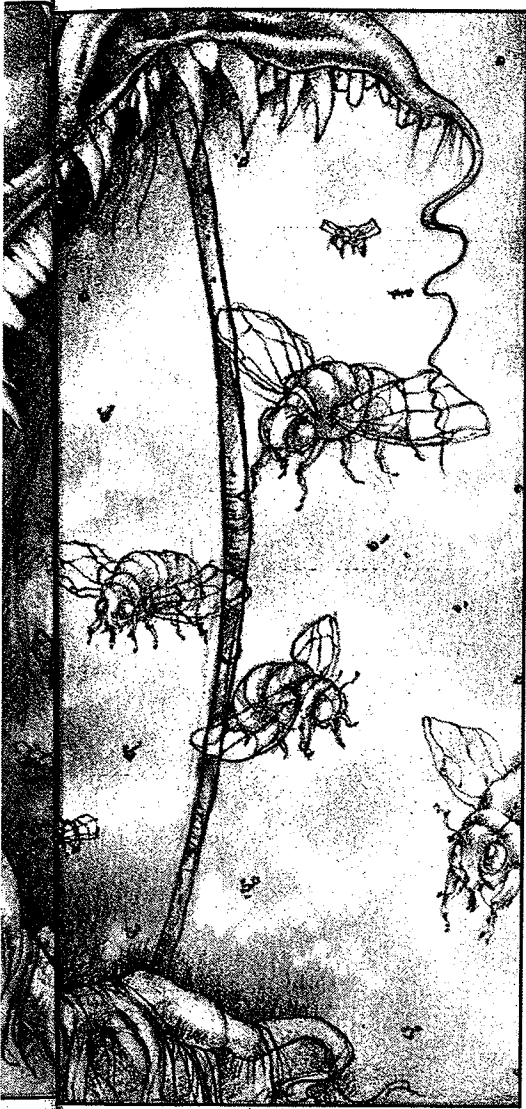
He crawled through a crack into one of the mountains. Inside he saw a room filled with gold, silver, and jewels. In the middle of the treasure sat a large lizard.

The slave grabbed a golden cup covered with jewels. As he turned to crawl out of the cave, the lizard hissed. Fire poured from its mouth, and its body swelled up. It was not a lizard. It was the Fire Dragon.

The slave's hair caught fire in the blast of flame from the Fire Dragon. But he held onto the cup. If he took it to his master, maybe he would not be whipped.

He struggled outside and quickly put his head into a mountain stream. When the flames were out, he ran off as fast as he could.

The mountain shook with the rage of the Fire Dragon. It had become so large that it could not follow the slave through the narrow opening.



BY NIGHTFALL, the Fire Dragon had cooled off somewhat. But it wanted revenge. It crawled outside. Then it spread its wings and flew down over a nearby village.

The monster destroyed everything in sight. By morning, the valley was a basin of white ashes.

The slave was taken to Beowulf, and he told his story. Some of Beowulf's men thought he should be offered to the Fire Dragon. But Beowulf said, "Let him eat honey."

Many of the old warriors thought Beowulf had gone mad. But Wiglaf, a young man, explained, "He means we should have pity for a man who was driven to do something he

will always regret doing."

The old warriors still grumbled. They worried that the old days of war were back again. And they dared one another to fight the Fire Dragon.

Beowulf said, "I will go against the Fire Dragon." His body had shrunk with age. But his heart was as big as ever.

The old warriors spoke together. Then one of them said, "Twelve of us will go with you."

"Good," said Beowulf. "You can carry the hives. Wiglaf, you come, too."

The men were speechless. What did Beowulf plan to do with hives?

They climbed into the mountains. Beowulf went slowly, leaning on Wiglaf's shoulder. Wiglaf carried a long stake and a large glove. Each of the other men carried a large hive.

Wiglaf told the almost-blind Beowulf how terrible the burnt-out valley looked. Beowulf replied, "We cannot bring back the living who were lost. But the Fire Dragon will pay with his life for what it has done. And we will use the treasure to build the village again."

Beowulf told his men to place the hives at the entrance to the Fire Dragon's den. Then he spoke to the bees in each hive. No one could understand what he said.

At last he told Wiglaf to go forward. The boy slipped through the crack. He found the Fire Dragon asleep in the den. And he hid himself near the monster.

Then Beowulf climbed through the crack. He shouted, "I am Beowulf come to kill you!"

The Fire Dragon woke up and hissed with rage. Its body started to swell.

"Do you call yourself a dragon?" Beowulf shouted. "You look more like a fat worm!"

With that insult, the Fire

Dragon reached its full size. It opened its mouth to breathe fire at Beowulf. Just then, Wiglaf stuck the stake in the monster's jaws, jamming them open. Then he threw the glove into the open mouth.

Beowulf made a buzzing sound. The Fire Dragon took a deep breath and swallowed the queen bee that had flown out of the glove at Beowulf's call.

Now Beowulf made another noise. All the bees poured out of the hives and followed their queen. Hundreds of bees went down the monster's throat. Then they began to sting its insides. The Fire Dragon roared with pain and fury. Finally it collapsed — dead.

BEOWULF ALSO collapsed. His armor was too heavy for him, and he was near death. Wiglaf knelt by him.

Beowulf chuckled. "When I was young, I'd never have done that. I'd have thought it was an easy trick. But the dragon is dead. Who was right — old Beowulf or young Beowulf?"

Wiglaf said, "Both."

"It's a pity about the bees," Beowulf said. "I loved them."

"They died well," said Wiglaf. "What a wonderful trick!"

Beowulf made Wiglaf promise not to tell the story about the bees. "One day," he said, "people may put the pieces together. They may figure out the last deed of Beowulf, the bee hunter. But for now, they need to believe in the young Beowulf."

They buried Beowulf in a piece of land that stuck out into the sea. It became a landmark for sailors. They would point at it and feel an inch taller.

Wiglaf became king and ruled wisely and well. When people asked about the dead hero, he'd say, "Beowulf was Beowulf." And that was all he would say, ever. *