

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE RING-GIVERS



W. H. CANAWAY

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Bertram Simkinson

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PENGUIN BOOKS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
MICHAEL JOSEPH

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,
Mitcham, Victoria

First published by Michael Joseph 1958
Published in Penguin Books 1961

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Sceal se hearda helm hyrstedgolde,
 fætum befeallen; feormynd swefað,
 þā ðe beadogriman bȳwan sceoldon;
 gē swylce sēo herepād, sio æt hilde gebād
 ofer borda gebræc bite irena,
 broснаð æfter beorne. Ne mæg byrnan hring
 æfter wigfruman wide fēran,
 hæleðum be healfe. Næs hearpan wyn,
 gomen glēobēames, nē gōd hafoc
 geond sæl swingeð, nē se swifta mearh
 burhstede bēateð. Bealocwealm hafað
 fela feorhcynna forð onsended!

Beowulf, ll. 2255–66

(The tough helmet, adorned with gold, must be despoiled of its plates; the burnishers, who should prepare the war-masks, are sleeping in death; and the mailshirt, similarly, which experienced the stroke of sword-blades over the clash of shields in battle, crumbles into decay, following the warrior. The ring-mail cannot travel far along with the fighter, by the hero's side. There is no joy of the harp, no delight in music, nor does the good hawk swoop through the hall, nor the swift horse stamp in the courtyard. Baleful death has caused many generations of men to perish!)

King Froda of the Hathobards rolled and sweated in nightmare. His fingers plucked at the bearskins on his couch like a dying man's; foam flecked his greying beard; his bloodshot eyes flickered madly from time to time as he strove to climb out of the pit of sleep.

Two gigantic women, naked, yellow, loathesome, were grinding gold for him in a great stone hand-mill. With each turn of the quern, gold rings spilled from it and clashed at his feet, endlessly, until Froda was wading in red gold, and the glint of the metal winked at him from the farthest corners of the vast hall in which he stood in his dream. The sweat coursed down the backs of the giantesses as they ground, and dripped from the purple nipples of their hanging breasts, until the monstrous women cried, 'Froda! Froda! Give us rest!'

But Froda commanded them to grind on, and the groans of the women mingled with the grinding of the mill. Still the gold rings fell, for an eternity, it seemed, as Froda stood amongst his gold. A second time the giantesses begged for rest; again Froda refused; and it was then that his dream became nightmare. Again the rings fell from under the quern, but now blood fell with them, and the rings were all dabbled with scarlet.

A third time the women asked for respite; a third time Froda refused, dream-compelled, though he ached to assent. The women ground as before, but now they sang, too, and as they sang, Froda's whole being was caught up in stark terror, swinging, swinging in sick gyration with the sound and the motion of the mill. His will withered, and he was drained of everything save utter panic, while helpless to do anything but listen to the song, as the quern ground, ground, the gold clashed and the blood splashed to the floor of Froda's hall.

Fenia and Menia were the giantesses' names. They had ground gold and good fortune for him in the past, but now they were grinding his doom. So went their song.

Menia sang:

*My eye sees fire
east of the castle; battle-cries ring out,
beacons are kindled!
Hosts of foemen
hither will come
to burn down the hall
over Froda's head. . . .'*

and more in the same strain, foretelling misfortune, and the end of the peaceful days of Froda's kingship. But Fenia's song was the more terrible. She sang:

*'Swing more strongly:
the son of Yrsa
will spill Froda's blood
for the death of Halfdane -
he is called Rolf
and is to her
both son and brother
as we both know. . . .'*

And still the women strained and swung at the quern, but their song had lapsed into inaudible moaning, more horrible to Froda, if possible, than the singing. His dream, however, was nearly over. Incontinently the giantesses stopped their grinding. Menia strode over to Froda, picked him up and flung him on to the highest heap of gold. Froda had a fleeting vision of himself, arms outflung as he lay supine on the gold pile. He distinctly heard the small chink and susurrus of the rings shifting under his head. And then the form of Menia began to grow, even more enormous than before. She bestrode him, cackling, and began to sing again. Strangely, the words were clear. It was something about Froda's baby son, Ingeld; but, try as he might, Froda could make no sense of the words, could not relate one to another. He only knew that they filled him with complete misery and despair.

Menia vanished, then reappeared by the side of Fenia, picking up the grinding slab of the mill, which she dashed to the ground. Fenia took up the huge quernstone and flung it on top of the slab

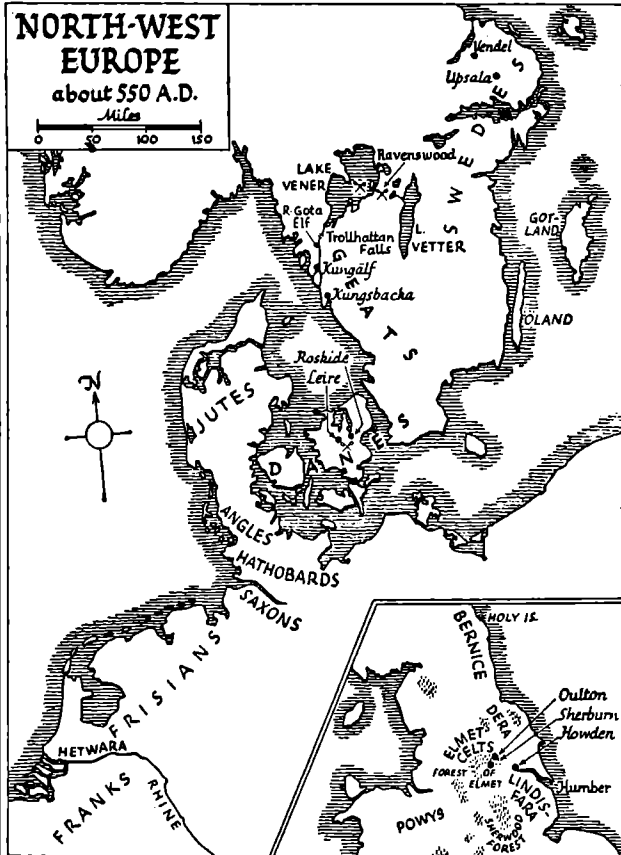
with a noise that made the hall shake. As she did so, a splinter flew from the stone and struck Froda in the left eye. He screamed and awoke. Ever after, he was blind in his left eye; and men feared him. Some said he was blessed, others, that he was accursed, but they were all afraid of him. For the one-eyed man was the form that Odin took on when he walked the earth; and, plainly, Froda had been marked by Odin for good or ill.

As for Froda, he ceased to take joy in anything but Ingeld, the baby prince, and went his way for the most part as if only half awake. Yet he seemed to prosper, for a time.

NORTH-WEST EUROPE

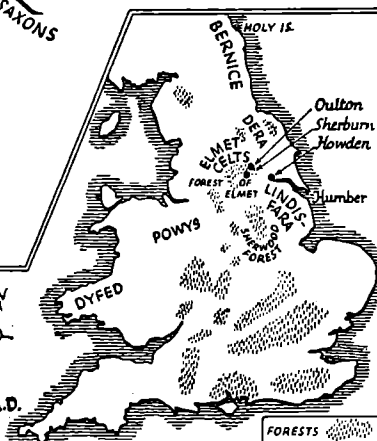
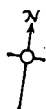
about 550 A.D.

Miles
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ENGLAND and WALES

showing some
Celtic and English
settlements about 550 A.D.
(same scale as main map)



I

The Walker in Shadow

A.D. 499-515

I

'ONE day I shall be king over all these people,' said young Helmwulf to the crab he had picked up.

The crab, unimpressed, merely nipped him, so the boy flung it into the grey sea and resumed his walk along the shore.

'I hate them all!' said Helmwulf, kicking morosely at the strands of ribbon-weed that tried to trip his feet. 'If only I were strong, I'd show them!' he muttered. 'These Geats!'

Helmwulf was not happy at the Geat court. His father, Edgethew, had been a Waymunding, an ally of the Geats. On his death the Geatish king Hathcyn had allowed the boy protection at the Geat court, not because of any tender feelings, but because Hathcyn's brother, Hygelac, had insisted that the boy should be adopted as a token of their gratitude to Edgethew, who had been a great warrior. That was three years ago. Helmwulf was now ten, and a source of anxiety to Hygelac. Hathcyn considered the boy a weakling, and was privately wondering whether it would not be best to have Helmwulf tied in a leather sack and dropped quietly at night into the very sea into which Helmwulf had just thrown the crab. There were limits to one's duty to a dead ally; and the child's disappearance could always be blamed on a wolf or bear, for he was given to solitary wandering.

The boy himself, though he knew nothing of his danger, was well aware of his weakness, and cursed it as he walked

over the sand. He neared the estuary of a small river, seating himself on a dune for a rest.

A few hundred yards away, a bitch otter and her cub were playing in the water to windward of him as he sat motionless in the marram grass that covered the dune. He gazed with envy at the swimming otters as they approached him in the stream. How well they swam! His keen eyes saw that both mother and cub were swimming lazily and without effort, kicking with their hind legs and pushing the water on either side of them with alternate sidewise strokes of the forepaws. Helmwulf observed them unthinkingly for a while; then, suddenly, the boy thought to himself how much better those sidewise strokes must be than the feeble dog-paddle which was all he himself could muster in the way of swimming. A slow lunge forward with his arm, then sideways, till his hand touched his thigh, then the other arm, while he kicked his feet. That was it! Helmwulf resolved to try out the stroke the very next day. He had only time to watch the animals for a few more minutes before hurrying back to Hathcyn's hall for the meal. The otters emerged from the water and began to wrestle, biting each other playfully, the cub hugging its mother round the neck.

'Ha!' shouted Helmwulf, scaring the otters as he rose. 'Little water-bears, you will make me strong!'

And he walked jauntily home along the beach, up the shore and on to the promontory, along the cobbled path and past the squalid huts that surrounded Hathcyn's hall.

The great fire of red fir was ablaze outside the hall, and the babble of warriors, laughing, talking and shouting, smote Helmwulf's ears as he passed through the narrow doorway. The meal had started. The long trestle-table down one wall was packed with men. Before the fire, smaller than the one outside, the king sat in the place of honour at the middle of the board, Hygelac at his side.

His confidence evaporating, Helmwulf squeezed as close to

the wall as he could, and began to edge his way over the rush-strewn floor. He had to pass the long line of men to reach his place at the back of the hall, where another table was laid for the women and children of the household, close to the opening to the women's quarters. There was no back door to Hathcyn's hall: the only way to the women's bower lay through the hall itself. So Helmwulf could not choose any other means of reaching his place than the conspicuous one forced on him by his lateness. But he was lucky. When he came opposite Hathcyn and was about to creep past, the king looked at him fleetingly with narrowed eyes. Hygelac laid a hand on his brother's arm in restraint. Hathcyn had been known to make latecomers to his board stand stripped by the fire until the skin blistered and scorched; the victims frequently died after days of screaming. Sometimes such a custom had spectacular results, as when Rolf Kraki visited Athils; but that will be told later. As it was, the child was past safely, and he slipped to his place with a scamper and a hop, as a mouse goes to its hole. Helmwulf's leg muscles were shaking with reaction. With downcast eyes, he began to eat his cold fat pork, washing it down with stale beer.

The royal womenfolk were in attendance at the men's table, so Helmwulf had no apologies to make. With the exception of one lad, Breca, the other children left him alone for the most part. Helmwulf wished that Breca would leave him alone, too, for Breca was a year older, was strong beyond his years, and a bully. He was watching Helmwulf with an eye of amused contempt.

'If I were king, I'd make you fry,' Breca said. Helmwulf remained silent, and Breca added, 'Dog's turd!'

Still Helmwulf said nothing. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Breca, though only a retainer's son, might one day become king; he had, at least, as much chance as Helmwulf, which was very little.

Breca wore a dagger at his side. He drew this with an air of ostentation, and stuck it fiercely into the plank beside his food. Then he picked up a bone, copying the warriors he had seen hurling bones at their weakest companion, and threw it at Helmwulf. The bone struck him on the nose before he had time to dodge, and the tears started to his eyes with the pain and the indignity. The other children laughed dutifully as Breca said, 'That's what you'd get if I were king. Ox-bones, though, not pig's trotters - every day!'

*

The drinking had started at the men's table. The king and Hygelac were both drunk, but not immoderately so, for although they drank stronger beer than the rest, they were used to it. They were in close conversation with two huge men, the brothers Wulf and Eofor, just returned from a visit to the Danish capital, Leire. The Geats were closely allied with the Danes, both in their war with the Swedes, and in their feud with the Hathobards, which had commenced when Froda killed King Halfdane.

'So Froda is dead,' mused Hathcyn, 'but who is the Hathobard king now?'

'Lord,' said Eofor, 'we do not know. But Hroar is enthroned at Leire.'

'You talk like an old spaewife, Eofor,' Hygelac said. 'You spend half an hour telling us that the sea was rough. When is it not rough? Then you say that Froda is dead, and Hroar is king in Leire. You sit on your news like a broody hen hatching out a pebble. Wulf, how did Froda die?'

'Halga's son Rolf killed him. Hroar, King Halga and Heregar made an oath as three brothers to avenge their father's death when Froda killed Halfdane last year.'

'We know that,' said Hathcyn, impatiently. 'And we know that they raised an expedition. But just what happened?'

Wulf looked at Eofor, and said, 'We are fighting men, lord,

and have not your gifts. Talking is thirsty work, and, for myself, I would rather swing an axe any day.'

'I agree with Wulf. We have forgotten what good beer tastes like, but a sip would help our tongues.'

'I may help your tongues with a hot iron soon,' Hathcyn grumbled; but he knew the brothers for good men, loyal to him, and signalled a daughter of his (by one woman or another, for he was a bachelor) to fetch two horns of his own brew.

Eofor finished first, having emptied the horn in one tremendous draught. He scorned to replace the horn on its stand, but put it on the table, so that it rolled on its side. Not a drop spilled out.

'That was good,' he said, with enormous appreciation. 'Now ask me what you will, lord.'

Hathcyn began to question the brothers closely. He was an intelligent man, though unscrupulous. At archery practice, while still a prince, he had shot and killed his elder brother, Herebold. The old king, Hrethel, had pined away and died. His duty was to avenge the death of his son, since even manslaughter exacted this duty; but he was equally forbidden to slay another son. The dilemma was too much for the old king; and Hathcyn survived. So it was that Hathcyn came to the throne in the year that Hygelac adopted Helmwulf. There were those who said that Herebold's death had been no accident; but that is as may be. Hathcyn was no fool, at all events. The story pieced itself together under the needle of his questions.

The three Danish brothers had attacked the Hathobards quite openly. To show the scorn in which they held Froda, Halga took with him his thirteen-year-old son Rolf, who even at that age was nearly as tall as his father. Most of Froda's warriors were raiding the Franks under Froda's right-hand man, Starkath; and the Danes met with little resistance, firing settlements as they approached Froda's hall from the east. After a short, bloody encounter at the outer fortifications of the

hall, they broke through and attacked the building itself. Heregar was the first to try to force the door. With three men, he ran forward, only to fall with a fatal spear-wound in the eye. Then Halga entered the fray. Like Heregar, he took three men with him, for the entrance to the hall was too narrow to permit of attack by a greater number. Halga fought like Thor, so Hroar told Wulf and Eofor, using a broad-axe like the hammer of the god. While Heregar and all his men lay dead or dying by the threshold, Halga and his party broke into the hall without loss. Hroar, hesitating a moment, grabbed the young Rolf, thrust the boy behind him, saying, 'Follow me!' and plunged through the doorway. Froda and Halga were lying together on the floor; neither had long to live, and they were passing the time in conversation, since no Hathobards save Froda remained alive. A blazing log, knocked out of the fire during the short combat, had set fire to a reed mat on the wall, and Froda's hall was beginning to burn.

Hroar had said that Froda seemed quite amused, glancing sideways at Halga with his one eye, and taunting him. Halga's wounds were all severe, but the worst was in his groin. Famous for his capacities with women (lust had always been the ruling passion of his life), Halga was agreeing ruefully that his wenching days were finished. His wife, Yrsa, was one of the most beautiful women alive, but he had been incapable of being satisfied by any one woman, no matter how beautiful.

'Yes, all that is over,' said Halga to Froda.

'You would have had small taste for it, even if you had killed me and escaped unwounded yourself,' Froda commented, 'for I have a short tale to tell which will make you wish you had never set foot in my country - and that lanky brat of yours, too, will wish himself elsewhere . . . Halga, do you remember queen Oluf of Saxland?'

The question was superfluous, for Halga's behaviour to Oluf was long remembered. He had arrived in Saxland with a large fleet at a time when the queen's men were away, and had

forced her to give him hospitality. During the night he had forced Oluf to give him something else besides. He was hopelessly drunk, and when he had had his way with the queen, had collapsed snoring upon her. The following morning found him tied in a sack on one of his own ships, with his men roaring with laughter when they discovered Halga, smeared with tar and with his head shaven. Oluf's servants had bundled the unconscious Halga, daubed and barbered, into the sack in the very early morning. Then, as the queen commanded them, they awakened Halga's men and said to them, 'Your lord had an unquiet night, and has gone back to the ships. The queen sends this shorn black ram to Halga that he may sacrifice it to Aegir, as is fitting. She asks him to slit its throat himself.' Then the servants gave presents to Halga's men, who left with jests about their master's unquiet night, for they knew his ways well. But those jests were as nothing to the ones that Halga himself had to suffer when he was revealed as the 'ram' which was to be sacrificed to the sea-giant.

Froda reminded Halga of those far-off happenings, and said, 'Queen Oluf had the best of that encounter, Halga.'

Halga was sweating with pain, and very weak, but he answered cheerfully enough. 'My wife bears witness to the fact that I bested Oluf, not the other way about.'

Fifteen years after his meeting with Oluf, Halga had made a surprise raid on the coast of Saxland, and had carried off Yrsa, whom he had seen herding cattle. He had said he wanted something to remind him of Oluf, and that a shepherdess would have been more appropriate, especially had there been a ram in the flock, but that a virgin cowmaid would do quite well. And when Yrsa had been washed and dressed in clean clothes, her fresh beauty had more than compensated him for Oluf's bygone trick.

The furniture in the hall was beginning to burn, as Hroar waited with Rolf and the other Danes for Halga and Froda to die and finish their talk. They had not long to wait.

'You did not have the better of queen Oluf, Halga,' Froda said slowly, 'because Yrsa is your daughter, the fruit of your night with the queen!'

Halga sank back with a moan.

Froda went on, 'When your child was born, Oluf hated the sight of her, and had her fostered by churls. You spun a strange thread when you first went to Saxland, for your daughter is your wife, and your son is his mother's brother. Take that thought with you to Hel.'

As Halga flapped dying in his own blood, and the Danish warriors stood thunderstruck, Rolf ran screaming from behind Hroar, seized Halga's axe, and chopped, chopped, and chopped at Froda, till they pulled him, still screaming, from the dismembered carcass, and hurried from the burning hall. They were well out to sea again, bound for Leire, when it occurred to anyone to wonder what had happened to Froda's infant son, Ingeld. That was why Wulf and Eofor did not know who was the Hathobard king.

So Hathcyn finished his questions. He and Hygelac drew a long breath.

'Fate goes a strange way, but it goes where it must,' said Hygelac, at length. He drained his bowl of fluted glass. It was of Roman workmanship, and Hygelac preferred it to a horn.

'Those were two peculiar men,' said Hathcyn. 'Froda bore Odin's mark, and in the end he did the work of the gods. Eofor, call the scop!'

The scop was an ageing bard, in a light-blue robe. He came forward at a trot when Eofor bellowed for him.

'Lord?' he asked.

'Sing. Sing of Froda and his mill,' ordered the king.

The scop took up his position to one side of the fire and struck a chord on the harp which he carried always with him. The warriors beat the board for silence, and the song commenced, the old man singing, or rather, chanting, the alliterative measures as he played.

The song put Hathcyn into a gloomy mood. When it was over, he sighed deeply, and said to Hygelac, 'You were right, brother, Fate goes a strange way. We all tread an unknown path in the dark.'

Wulf laughed. He was not given to feeling elegiac.

'Halga's path was mostly trodden in the dark - yes. And he trod women, not stones, as a cock treads hens. He put his foot wrong when he trod Yrsa, though.'

Hygelac reprimanded Wulf at once. Incest was no joking matter. Hathcyn agreed.

'What about Rolf?' the king asked as an afterthought. 'I always heard of him as a promising lad. Did this affair send him mad, or what? And how about Yrsa?'

Eofor replied, 'Yrsa left Leire in a hurry. No one knows yet where she went; as far as she could from Rolf, I expect. She turned against him as soon as she heard the story from Hroar. Rolf did not go mad. Hroar had the good sense to spend most of the voyage telling the boy what a good omen his parentage was. It resembled that of Sinfiotli the Volsung, who was one of the greatest heroes of all time, though born in incest. So, you see, little by little Hroar took the edge off Rolf's suffering, and in the end had quite persuaded him that he was destined to do great things.'

'That would not surprise me,' Hathcyn said. 'Rolf is tall, you say, and strong?'

'As tall as yourself, king. As to his strength, it would need a man's muscles, not a child's, to wield Halga's axe as Rolf did.'

Hathcyn nodded. 'Yes, he must be strong. Hroar will protect him. Hygelac, do *you* envy Hroar, when you think of that curd-faced Helm wulf of yours?'

The prince made an easy answer, but had to acknowledge that Hathcyn, with his usual penetration, had read his brother's thought.

The king rewarded Wulf and Eofor with a gold ring each,

half a hand's span across, and then, for a while, the conversation turned to generalities. They discussed the possibility of the Hathobard feud involving the Geats; the progress of the endless Danish and Geat wars with the Swedes. Then all the warriors, many of them drunk, some few comparatively sober, went to their rest in the hall, or sought their women in the bower, where small children like Helmwulf lay alone and loveless, listening in the darkness to the sounds of love.

2

In the years that followed Froda's death, Helmwulf grew strong. Day after day in the warm weather found him in the sea, practising the cunning stroke he had learned from the otters. His frame filled out, and the muscles of his body gained in power, while the constant swimming lent him stamina. In the winters, Helmwulf would go off alone in the snow every day for a while. He clung to a childish habit of throwing things into the sea, but chose ever larger and larger stones, until he could hurl a twelve-pound stone some forty yards, at the age of fifteen. One other form of exercise he had, a strange one. Helmwulf would slip into the woods to a certain grove where the light-green leaves of the birches began to give way to the sombre pines, throw his arms round a particular pine tree, about the thickness of a man's thigh, and wrestle with the tree as if it had been a man. Never by nature violent or strong, the youth acquired violence and strength because of an instinctive knowledge that, without them, he would never survive. His fortitude of will, the only gift he was born with, gave him these other things, together with that compassion for the weak which stayed with him when he himself became strong. While the other Geat children played the games which would fit them for manhood, therefore, Helmwulf went his own way as much as he could. But it was too much to hope that he could avoid discovery for ever.

One day, he was tugging and grunting at his pine tree, when a bellow of laughter spun him round, scarlet-faced.

It was Eofor. 'And what are you doing?' the warrior asked. 'Making love to a tree?' Then, seeing that the boy was desperately afraid of him, Eofor came forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. 'No, don't be angry with me,' he said.

Helmwulf was struck by the incongruity of the idea that anyone could be angry with such a being as Eofor. He and his brother, Wulf, had scarcely ever spoken to the lad; but, apart from Hygelac, they were also alone in never having addressed an unkind word or a sneer to him, with the consequence that Helmwulf worshipped them.

He stood silent in his embarrassment.

Eofor laughed again, more quietly this time. 'Little fox, I know what you were up to. I have been spying on you for some time. The lord Hygelac told me to find out how you spent your time alone. I think he was wondering if you had found yourself a troll-maid for a mistress, as men say old Froda did once. But I can tell him it was only a tree!' Then, as Helmwulf was still confused, Eofor asked, 'And just how strong are you now?'

'You know all about it, Eofor?'

'All - or nearly all. I have watched you in the sea, swimming where I tell you frankly I would not dare to swim. Do you make a sacrifice before you set out on these shipless voyages of yours? Or are you just trying to kill yourself as quickly as you can? And I have watched you throwing pebbles into the sea. Come now, and match yourself with me!'

At the challenge, Helmwulf jumped up, noting the twinkle in Eofor's eye.

They went down to the beach, Eofor rooting in the snow-covered sand above the lines of breakers reaching out towards Whale's Ness. At last he found the stone he wanted. 'We will throw along the beach, not into the sea. The snow will mark where the stone lands. Now then! You beat this.'

Eofor threw. The stone curved in what seemed to Helmwulf a very short parabola, landed with a thud and rolled a little way. Eofor paced after it. 'Thirty paces,' he announced, and brought back the stone.

Helmwulf took it, and realized why Eofor's throw had seemed short. The stone felt immensely heavy. Looking closely at it, he saw why: it was of ore-bearing rock. He hefted it in his hand, went back on his right leg, and threw, grunting with effort. The stone dropped to the ground four paces short of Eofor's effort.

'Not bad,' the elder man commented. 'Now we will wrestle.'

Helmwulf's face fell. Was Eofor's apparent friendliness just another ruse to humiliate him? He remembered when Breca had offered to teach him to wrestle, two years before. Taken off his guard, Helmwulf had agreed, only to find himself thrown at once by a swift cross-buttock, with a kick to the pit of his stomach as he lay on the ground.

He said warily, 'I can't wrestle.'

'Pretend I am your tree, boy. Come! Wrestle with me.'

So they wrestled, hip to hip, and Eofor, who had expected an easy victory, was surprised by the power of his young opponent. Straining, heaving, he forced Helmwulf down at last, and then sat beside him, wiping the sweat from his brow and smiling at the boy lying on the snow.

'Now listen,' he said. 'Of your swimming I say nothing, but this stone-throwing, this tree-fighting, will not do. A stone is not a spear, and a tree is not a man. A tree stands there, that is all. True, it stands strongly; but a man fights back. Now you are strong, you must learn to use your strength. I will teach you to wrestle and to throw a straight spear, and Wulf shall teach you sword-play and the use of the bow, for I have to grant that he is the better at those. How does that suit you?'

Helmwulf said that if a god had appeared and asked him what on this earth he would like most, he would have requested

just what Eofor was offering him; and Eofor grinned again, his teeth gleaming through his beard.

So began Helmwulf's friendship with Eofor and Wulf. That with Wulf lasted only until the battle of Ravenswood, but Eofor was his friend for many years.

*

In his sixteenth year, little trace remained of the former Helmwulf. Though he had not yet killed a man (a deficiency which he was to supply before the year was out), he was so promising a youth that men began openly to compare him with Hroar's nephew Rolf. True, those who did so were Geats, and made their comparison mainly to point out to visiting Danes that the Geats, too, were not lacking in oncoming young men; but there was some truth in their boasts. Helmwulf had advanced apace under the care of Wulf and Eofor: apart from their tuition, their affection gave Helmwulf something that Hygelac, for all his good intentions towards his ward, could not supply. Hathcyn was a cautious king, clever enough to have his brother fight battles for him, while contriving to take most of the credit upon himself; and, indeed, the strategic credit was undoubtedly Hathcyn's. But Hygelac was often away on the king's affairs, and Helmwulf had to get used to snatching brief hours with his guardian in between missions. Wulf and Eofor, though rough companions, were warm and human; and their warmth and humanity gave Helmwulf confidence and stability, which reflected themselves in his bearing. The other young men began to treat him with respect, though Breca had as little to do with him as possible.

Hygelac's daughter, Swan, began at this time to tag about behind the men when Helmwulf was with the brothers. Her mother had died giving birth to Swan, in the year of Helmwulf's adoption, and she had been cared for by a young maiden, Hygd, whom Hygelac eventually married, after Ravenswood. Swan was a pretty child, though wilful and coquettish, and

Eofor used to growl at her good-humouredly that she would be a handful for her husband when she grew up and married. He found out later how true that was.

Stories kept reaching the Geat court of Rolf's prowess. At the age of nineteen, he was sitting at Hroar's side in Leire. Hroar was a peace-loving man whom circumstance had thrust into a warlike role, and the young Rolf, full of drive and ambition, was rapidly taking more and more power to himself. These tales filled Helmwulf with an emotion he could not quite put a name to. It was not quite envy, not quite a desire for emulation; in short, he was incapable of describing it. He had a feeling that he and Rolf would cross paths, and that the end would be bad for one of them, though.

Eofor and Helmwulf were leaning idly on the outer wall of Hathcyn's hall one day, Swan perched on the stones by Eofor's head. She had been placed there by Eofor as a punishment for thrusting a handful of none-too-clean straw in at his waist-belt when he had made a noise that warriors (so Swan asserted) should not make in the presence of a princess. 'Clean yourself with that, you pig,' she had cried, adding more comments of the same sort; and there she was, kicking at Eofor's iron shoulder and begging to be set down. So Hygelac found them.

Eofor hastily lifted Swan down from the wall, and greeted the prince.

'Wet nurse, I have work for you,' Hygelac said, to Eofor, 'and for your handmaiden, Helmwulf.'

'Speak more plainly, prince.' Eofor did not relish Hygelac's gibe, though it was true that he was inordinately fond of Swan.

'Battle.'

'And may I come, too?' Helmwulf asked excitedly.

'When?' said Eofor.

'Oh, it is nothing much,' Hygelac explained airily. 'The king is sending us to burn a few farms in Sweden, that's all. It will be a good opportunity for blooding this youngster here,

who by all accounts can now hold a sword without his wrist breaking under the weight of it.'

Helmwulf laughed aloud with glee. In the time of his weakness Hygelac had never taunted the boy with it, and this man-to-man jesting was much to his taste. 'I can try, lord,' he said.

'Come, that is no fit boasting speech for a warrior. Today you receive arms, and you must compose something less modest than "I can try." Well, you shall tell us in hall of the Swedes you will slaughter – but mind you leave king Angantir for me if we meet him on our jaunt!'

'Or for me,' said Eofor.

*

Fortunately for Helmwulf, he was not then destined to encounter Angantir, the great and terrible Swedish king. His first fight was a small affair, as Hygelac had said it would be.

Hygelac took only two ships beside his own, each carrying thirty men. They sailed coastwise for nine days; then, avoiding the waters between the islands of Öland and Gotland, made their easting on the tenth day. Turning north again, they kept the Gotland coast on their beam, finally turning again abruptly west as they weathered the northernmost tip of Gotland. The precautions were necessary because the Swedes dominated all these waters at the time. Hygelac's small fleet was to make a raid which had little more than nuisance value, to remind Angantir that the Geats had awakened swiftly after the winter, and that Swedish power was not so daunting as Angantir appeared to believe it should be.

Helmwulf was sea-sick, excited, and nervous, in that order, during the voyage, and for the first time he felt envy of Rolf. The exchange of news with a Danish vessel during the early part of the voyage brought the tidings that Rolf had sailed the previous spring for England, and had not yet returned. He had taken twenty shiploads of men: a big command for a nineteen-year-old, leaving Hroar in Leire to muse nostalgically

over his own days in England. Hroar's queen, Walthea, testified to the beauty and grace of the women there; Hroar had carried her off from the Helmings, and had preferred her to all his booty. Yet the burning of 'a few farms' gave Helmwulf an interesting taste of war.

Wulf and Eofor commanded Hygelac's other two ships, and Helmwulf was sorry to be parted from them during the voyage. He drew closer to his guardian, however, in consequence. Hygelac was not easy to get to know. A younger brother, with Hathcyn on the throne, was always in a dangerous position; and Hygelac's years of balancing delicately before the king, keeping loyalty uppermost, allowing Hathcyn the fame for Hygelac's deeds, while keeping his own men faithful to him, and, above all, never seeming to overstep the boundary which separated staunch support from the aggregation of too much power, had all combined to make Hygelac wary and guarded in his inmost self. But their visit to Sweden made Hygelac love Helmwulf as a son.

The ships made their landfall in a small inlet due east of Lake Vetter. Helmwulf no longer felt nervous. He was proud and elated. His iron helmet, plated with bronze, was heavy, but he had worn it throughout the voyage, and had become used to its weight. He wore a collar of bronze hoops, to turn sword-cuts aimed at his neck, and a mail shirt of closely interlocking iron rings. His sword-belt bore a steel sword of Frankish make, and a sax, or stabbing knife. His round wooden shield was strengthened with iron, and he carried a spear of ash. He had no bow. Though he had become a good shot under Wulf's guidance, Helmwulf never took to archery, preferring to meet his man face to face.

The three ships nosed up the firth like three swans on a pond: the inlet was sheltered from the south-westerly wind that was blowing in the open sea, and all Hygelac's own vessels had their prows fashioned in the likeness of a swan. At the end of the water there was a little landing-place, from which

a wretched village straggled up to the *kulle*, a bald-topped hillock which had been roughly fortified with a limestone wall, and within which was the keep where some petty chieftain held sway. Beyond and around, the pines climbed up to the pastures, to which most of the able-bodied men had taken the flocks for the summer.

Those of the villagers who had the time ran yelling and screeching into the *kulle*; others hid in their houses as Hygelac's warriors leaped to the shore and made fast the ships. Leaving a skeleton crew in charge of them under Eofor, the prince stormed the *kulle*. As Helmwulf passed Eofor, the elder man said, 'Now you will find something to do more worth while than wrestling with a tree.'

Helmwulf paused long enough to answer, 'Just as well, for I broke the tree before we came away,' and ran on, leaving Eofor staring round-eyed after him.

The defence of the *kulle* did not last long. There were no more than two dozen men opposed to the Geats, and they were quickly butchered. Women, children, and old men were herded into a corner. Hygelac stood, panting slightly, surveying the scene with a practised eye. He was calculating the proportion of dead men to prisoners; and, making some allowance for those villagers who were still hiding in their huts, reckoned that he had still some forty men to deal with at the higher pastures. He turned to Helmwulf, who was scarcely breathing, and said, 'Well, boy, you cheated me out of this.' He prodded the body of the chieftain with a contemptuous foot, and added, 'He is a poor prize, but his helmet is plated with gold, for all that. It should fit you. Take it.'

Helmwulf relieved the dead chief of his helmet, and found that it did indeed fit him. It was superior to his bronze-plated helmet, having the likeness of a boar, symbol of the god Frey, engraved on each of the gold plates; and Helmwulf swung his old helmet in his hand. He had killed the chieftain in a fit of

rage. Breaking through the *kulle* rather behind the rest of the warriors, since his brief conversation with Eofor had delayed him a little, he had been struck at once on the shoulder by a stone which a very old man had thrown at him. With a shout to Odin in which anger and humiliation were mingled, he had rushed forward, elbowing aside first Breca, and then Hygelac. His momentum carried him on to the chief's shield, but luckily not on to his spear; and Helmwulf had stabbed once, twice to the pit of the chief's stomach under the shield.

Hygelac sent a runner down to Eofor, with a message that it was now safe for him and his men to go through the village, leaving the ships. Then the prince detailed half a dozen men to guard the prisoners.

'Wulf, up to the farms on the south side,' he concluded. 'I will take the north. Come, Helmwulf, your blade can drink the blood of sheep and a churl or two!'

The screams of women came to Helmwulf's ears as he emerged from the trees flanking the stony path. He leaped over the top of a little cascade which fell down a precipice at the side of the path, then he turned a moment to glance at the far-off village through the clear, dry air. Eofor's men were going through the village with a will; but that was the way of war. Hygelac's party trod on their own shadows on the steep, short turf.

They split up into parties of half a dozen men, and began ranging the pastures, slaughtering men and beasts alike. The men were ill-armed, for the most part, and put up little resistance. Helmwulf saw Breca swing a mighty blow with his sword at the retreating back of one unfortunate peasant. The sword took him between the pelvis and the ribs, severing the spine. The man seemed to fold forwards as if his body was hinged - as indeed it was, in some sort, the flesh and muscles of the man's stomach forming the hinge. Breca roared with laughter at the churl, who lay moaning, his chin on his feet. Breca ran off to seek other quarry.

Helmwulf looked after him, and his eyes hardened. Swiftly he stooped over the dying churl, drawing his sax, which he slipped into the man's heart under his ribs. His moans stopped; and Helmwulf went after Breca, overtaking him close to a sorry shambles of men and sheep, by a burning hut.

Breca sheathed his sword and waited for Helmwulf to come up to him.

'This is good sport, Helmwulf,' he said, 'though you cheated me out of the chieftain's helmet.'

'Who are you to take words from Hygelac's lips?' Helmwulf asked. 'You can't even kill a churl cleanly. As for the chieftain and his helmet, you would still be standing there with your mouth open, catching flies in it. I gave the chief a quick death; and I had to finish your churl for you. I came after you to see if you require any more help.'

Breca's lips paled, and he took a half step towards Helmwulf; then, thinking better of it, muttered something, and turned away. Helmwulf thought, with some satisfaction, that the score was becoming even between Breca and himself. Yet an incident occurred on the way back to the village which put him very much on his guard.

Hygelac's party were crossing the cascade above the precipice, one by one. As Helmwulf poised himself for the jump, he felt a blow between the shoulder blades which sent him off balance as he leaped. He landed with his right foot in water and his left on nothing at all. If it had not been for one of the warriors already over the cascade, Helmwulf would certainly have fallen over the precipice. This man had paused, as had Helmwulf before, to look at the village, where the smoke of burning dwellings was rising. At Helmwulf's involuntary shout, the man had flung out a supporting hand and saved him.

Breca joined Helmwulf, who was waiting for him with a white face, and said, 'You nearly took a short cut then. This

animal' (he was carrying a live sheep, which he was taking back to the ship, as were many other warriors) 'kicked me and made me stumble.'

Helmwulf was about to answer when they were interrupted by Hygelac, who shouted from the other side of the stream to them, telling them to move quickly, and keep their boasts for later. Helmwulf looked at Breca for a second, then turned his back and plunged after the others into the pines.

The booty was poor: sheep, goats, a few chickens, six or eight young women; but little gold. Three of the sheep were sacrificed over the ships' bows, and then they stood out to sea. After a night or two, the women became reconciled to their fate, which was none too terrible, for most of them would marry in Geatland, either to the warriors who had captured them or to some other.

*

After Yule and the great feast in Hathcyn's hall, men came from all parts of Geatland to the moot, where the king dispensed justice. Three men were condemned to death; and they were sacrificed after the moot, together with nine horses, thirty sheep and fifty cockerels. Thus men and gods were satisfied. All except Bragi, god of verse, to whom men boasted when drunk with mead at the Yule feast. Bragi had to wait for the summer.

At the Yuletide banquet, Breca had drunk too much ale, and had followed it with many a cup of mead. When Hathcyn had asked whether any man wished to make a Bragi boast, a few men had risen, one by one, and composed limp verses, boasting of what they swore to accomplish before the new year ended. Most of them announced their intention of killing Swedes, capturing beautiful girls, and winning treasure to repay their mead to their king. Then Breca got up. Swaying slightly, for he had vomited several times during the day and was now in the process of drinking himself sober again, Breca said:

'Where on the swan's way many a swimmer
drinks of Aegir's ale too deeply,
I, Breca, fear no breaker,
of all swimmers strongest and swiftest.
Hear, Bragi! I, Breca,
swear with my sword to slay a sea-swine.
And who will war with me on the whale's way?'

There was a murmur of grudging applause, for Breca was not popular. Yet it was a good verse, and a better boast. If Breca were able to fulfil it by killing a porpoise while swimming, he would be famous. The warriors looked round the table to see if any of their companions would take up the challenge. A buzz of surprise rose up when Helmwulf stood and answered Breca:

'Edgethew's son stands here, eager
to blow froth from ale of Aegir,
swim better, kill more than Breca,
war till the whale-road runs wine-red,'

which caused a roar of approbation.

After that, time seemed slow till summer for the Geats. Helmwulf and Breca became acknowledged champions among the younger warriors, who deferred to them. But at last the warmer weather came. Sprats and herrings began to move inshore; the running salmon followed them, feeding voraciously on the smaller fish; and after the salmon came the hunting porpoises.

Even Hathcyn's cold spirit was stirred by the thought of the contest between Breca and Helmwulf, and since spring his watchers had been scanning the sea from Whale's Ness. When the first of the rolling, hogbacked shapes was sighted, a breathless messenger ran into Hathcyn's hall at once with the news; and soon the entire court were running or riding to the beach, Helmwulf and Breca carried irresistibly amongst them.

Hathcyn swiftly ordered a boat to be got ready. Then the king embarked with the contestants, followed by Hygelac and the senior warriors, who were to row the party out to sea, for there was a flat calm, and the sea was as of beaten pewter. The junior warriors and the rag-tag and bobtail were left ashore to watch as best they might; and the ship moved out into the bay.

Soon, salmon leaped about them, seeking their parent rivers and escape from the remorseless harrying of the predators. The porpoises were hunting in a two-tiered formation, as is their way, interweaving as one tier sounded while the other came up to breathe, and at the same time driving the salmon upwards and chopping them near the surface. In no time at all, it seemed (though they were a couple of miles offshore by then), the ship was among the school; and the curving, glistening black backs of the porpoises were everywhere.

'Now you may carry out your Bragi boast,' said the king to Helmwulf and Breca.

At an order from Hygelac, who was standing by the warrior at the steering oar, the crew backed water as the ship came about.

'Go,' commanded Hathcyn.

'Now we will see who is the better of us two,' Breca said to Helmwulf.

'As you say,' he answered, and dived from the boat.

A shout went up from the warriors as Breca followed Helmwulf. Both were wearing their mailshirts and a sword-belt, but Breca had drawn his sword before entering the water, while Helmwulf kept his in its sheath. They swam strongly away from the boat, then separated until they were fifty or sixty yards apart, when they trod water and waited.

Helmwulf did not have long to wait. A porpoise came to the surface not six feet away, preceded by an agonized flash of silver as a salmon leaped to evade the animal's jaws. Helmwulf flung himself through the water, drawing his sax in

preference to his sword, for the sax lay close to his right hand. As the porpoise rolled, preparatory to submerging again – for it had missed the salmon – Helmwulf dived and ripped at the belly of the animal, to be knocked momentarily unconscious by the thud and shock of water from the creature's tail as it accelerated and sounded, leaving Helmwulf to come up retching and coughing, and bleeding from the nose and ears into a larger patch of crimson from the porpoise's wound.

Helmwulf shook his head, shouts from the boat sounding muffled and far-off. The wounded porpoise surfaced some thirty yards away, and lay in the water gulping air. Helmwulf swam after it, and heeded the shouts no longer.

They were shouts of warning. All eyes had been on Helmwulf, with a glance for Breca now and then (for he had had ill fortune, no porpoise having surfaced near him), when one of the warriors had caught sight of a great triangular dorsal fin cutting through the water six or eight hundred yards away, had screamed and pointed; and all the men in the ship had begun shouting to warn the contestants. For just as the salmon pursues the sprat, and the porpoise the salmon, so the killer whale, fiercest creature of the sea, pursues the swift porpoise. Following the taste-trail of blood, the killer had come up from the depths of ocean, and it forged along, just below the surface and far more swiftly than the porpoises, towards Breca and Helmwulf.

More of the black dorsal fins were visible in the distance, and Hathcyn ordered his men to row for the shore, leaving Helmwulf and Breca. This they did, still shouting, while the killers ravaged among the porpoises, stirring the sea into a bloody foam as they snapped and tore at the smaller animals. While the hunting methods of the porpoises were like a game in some sort, because the animals took pleasure in the dance-like movement of their formations, the killer whales hunted much more terribly, a mere raging pack.

Helmwulf reached his porpoise and, having sheathed his

sax, plunged his sword into its head at the base of the brain. The creature died in a convulsive spasm, which once more sent Helmwulf under the surface; bubbles ascended past his eyes through the red-clouded sea. Shaking his head once again above the water, he had a nightmarish glimpse of a vast pair of jaws in which teeth as long as his sax sloped back towards a throat like a cave, and the flank of the whale drove past him, seeming as big as Hathcyn's boat, while the monstrous predator flung itself at the porpoise.

Without thinking, for he was still gasping and coughing, Helmwulf thrust his sword at the killer's side, and its momentum opened an enormous gash, while Helmwulf was hurled against the whale, and then down, down, by a tail-stroke compared with which that of the porpoise seemed like the beat of a hawk's wing as it bates from the falconer's wrist. . . . Weak, sick and dazed, Helmwulf swam feebly away from the battle, some cold spark of reason which was left to him making him sheath his sword as he did so, and thus give two arms to the otter-stroke which carried him in the opposite direction to the whale, which was threshing ever more weakly as other killers tore great mouthfuls of flesh from its body. At last, Helmwulf was forced to turn on his back and float, inert and unutterably weary, yet compelled by that same spark of reason to conserve his strength, for the tide was setting inshore, until Wulf and Eofor hauled him into the small boat which they had launched from the shore at the same time as the king's ship left the pair of contestants. It was lucky for Helmwulf that the brothers were not old enough, doughty though they were, to be given one of the places in the king's ship.

Helmwulf lay in the bottom of the boat, his head on a net, among the fish-scales and the cracked crab-shells, and smiled up at Wulf and Eofor.

They carried him up to the hall. No word was said about Hathcyn's defection, as it was understood that the king had

acted rightly in the circumstances: a boat-load of Geat veterans, and the king of the Geats, was not worth risking for two young hotheads. It would have been a different matter had it been the king in the water; then it would have been the duty of every man to leap in and die with him. As it was, Hathcyn greeted the brothers warmly as they laid Helmwulf on the trestle of the table, and Hygelac bent over him, yelling for the leech.

'There is no need of that,' said Helmwulf, stirring and sitting up, his legs swinging from the table top. 'A cup of warm ale is all the leech I want. Well, lord,' he addressed Hathcyn, 'I have carried out my Bragi boast, as you commanded. But where is Breca, that great swimmer?'

No one knew; and no one saw Breca again. He had either been drowned, or eaten by a killer whale. One of the two was certain; and certain it was, also, that he had not fulfilled his Bragi boast.

Hathcyn gave Helmwulf four massive gold rings to commemorate the feat. Helmwulf had them made up into a collar to replace his bronze one, and in addition found that he had become a person of note in Geatland. When people compared him with Rolf as before, they had more justification than formerly. Later, Hathcyn's scop composed a lay about Helmwulf's battle in the sea, tricking it out with all sorts of poetical exaggerations; but that was after the battle of Ravenswood, when Helmwulf changed his name.

3

In his twenty-second year, Helmwulf was as tall as his elders Hygelac, Eofor, and Wulf, and together the men made a quartette of giants, each six foot five inches in height. Hygelac and Helmwulf were fair, though Hygelac's hair and beard had ruddy tints, while Helmwulf's were tinged with brown. The brothers were dark-haired, and swarthy of skin. Hathcyn was

liker to a badger, short and heavy shouldered, with dark brown hair and beard, streaked with yellowish grey.

During the winter, Hathcyn decided to dispel any suspicions which his people might have had that he was a mere stay-at-home king by attacking the Swedes with the full force of his arms. By spring, the pick of his fighting men had congregated at Kungsbacka, whence Hathcyn and his army, numbering four thousand, marched in April. Their line of march lay towards the two great lakes, Vener and Vetter; and it was on the relatively narrow neck of land between these lakes that Angantir elected to meet them, with nine thousand stalwart troops. At Kungälf, Hygelac assembled two thousand men, among them Helmwulf, Eofor, and Wulf. They set off a day's journey behind the king, a long, weary trek through the thick forests of northern Geatland and over the gravel ridges of the north-western tip of the highlands. Hygelac had recommended that the armies should sail coastwise and attack Uppsala, instead of going by land, for the Geats were the superiors of the Swedes in seamanship, and they might have hoped to cripple the Swedish power in a series of preliminary naval battles; but Hathcyn had overridden this suggestion, preferring to avoid the long voyage through seas controlled by the Swedes through force of numbers. So, bitten by flies, struggling through thick undergrowth, the Geats cursed Hathcyn and longed for the fresh sea winds and the taste of salt spray in their mouths. Their spirits became low, oppressed by the gloom of the woods and the endless succession of nights when, as everyone knew, trolls held sway in the forests.

It became evident that Angantir was not relying only on force of arms to conquer the Geats: he had enlisted the help of sorcerers also. Arrived at a certain district where the trees had begun to thin out between the lakes, Hathcyn's army sought the shelter of a wood, Ravenswood as it was called afterwards. They had not penetrated far into this wood when Hathcyn held up his hand as a signal for those behind him

to halt. Facing the army, and impaled on stakes, were nine horses' heads: a spell intended to bring defeat to the Geats. Hathcyn attempted to reassure his followers, drew his bow, and loosed off an arrow at the nearest head. Unfortunately, a raven which had been feeding on the carrion flapped into the arrow's line of flight, and fell to the ground, screeching horribly.

'You were ever a poor shot with the bow, lord,' said one of Hathcyn's senior warriors to the king, recalling the accident which had brought Hathcyn to the throne, and paling as he spoke, 'but he who kills Odin's bird is dead already, and nothing remains now for us but to die with you.'

Hathcyn himself had turned as white as frost, and as cold in mood, though he knew himself doomed in that moment, as the warrior had said.

Hathcyn dismounted from his horse, and his earls did likewise, until the troops who were on foot had caught up with them. Then they held council while scouts were sent out to the north-east. All were in favour of a speedy advance to make contact with Angantir's forces, a decision which they might not have made had Hathcyn lost his head and permitted gossip about what had happened when he had first entered the wood. He had the quickness of wit to constrain his earls to silence, and furthermore kept them busy making formal speeches in support of his plan for an immediate attack, while the lesser soldiers had to stay quietly listening. The scouts returned before long with news which lent force to Hathcyn's idea. Angantir, it appeared, was having an earth-wall built at the summit of a gently rising slope some four miles from the wood: the fortification was not yet complete, and if the Geats could carry it they would break through much more easily into the Swedish hinterland than if they gave Angantir time to finish his preparations. So they rushed on out of Ravenswood with all speed. At its northerly edge they came upon another sign that the scouts had missed. The

bodies of three thralls, transfixd with arrows, dangled from an ash-tree; the empurpled faces with their swollen, protruding tongues gazed over the heads of the Geats; and Hathcyn, riding closer, saw that runes had been carved with knives on the naked bodies. Hathcyn set his lips, and led the army by, into the rising plain, dotted here and there with copses and spinneys.

Soon Angantir's earthworks were visible, and the Geats heard the sound of war-horns as the Swedish sentries sighted them. The slaves working on the fortifications scurried inside, to be replaced by a long line of fighting men, who swiftly formed a shield-wall; and on the earthwork itself, splendid in a silver helmet and a blood-red cloak, stood Angantir, King of the Swedes, the most terrible man who walked in the world at that time. He was sixty, but his body was like that of a thirty-five year old swordsmith, dwarfing the earls who surrounded him. His face was proud, imperious, cruel, and he was accorded by the Swedes the veneration that they give to the gods. His white beard sparkled in the April sun as he threw back his head and laughed at the Geats, peal after peal of bellowing mirth. Then he raised his own horn, and blew a great blast which lasted a full half minute.

The Geats were forming up into a triangular or wedge-shaped phalanx some half a mile from the earthwork when Angantir blew his horn. At once, every copse on the Geat's flanks came alive with mounted men, and from behind them the air sang with arrows. Then the horsemen hurled themselves on the Geat flanks as the Geats reeled in the storm of shafts; the Swedes broke through them; and the battle resolved itself into a score of separate battles, Hathcyn's men trying desperately to re-unite and reconstitute their ranks, the Swedes cutting into them again and again.

The noise of the conflict rang on the plain: men's shouts and screams, the man-like scream of dying horses and the neighing of living ones mingled with the ring and clash of

arms, and in occasional lulls of the battle, the hiss of arrows was heard, and the knock as they found their mark.

Hathcyn went berserk. His eyes glazed, his face, arms and neck red with other men's blood, he threw away his shield and swung his sword with both hands. He killed one of his own earls and straddled over the man, froth on his beard. Then, collecting his wits, he cut his way through the Swedes to the earthwork. As he approached it, a cart drawn by oxen lumbered through the shield wall. The cart was manned by Angantir's senior warriors, with Angantir himself, and his queen, in it. With some sixty men, Hathcyn attacked before Angantir and his warriors could get down from the cart. Screaming, 'Odin! Odin!' the Geat beheaded one of the oxen with a stroke of his sword, thrust into the belly of the Swede above him on the cart, and, as Geats on the other side overturned it, Hathcyn dragged out the Swedish queen and flung her to the warriors behind him.

'Take that bitch and ravish her!' he shouted. 'Thus we will turn Swedes into Geats!' The group of warriors retired and fought their way backwards with the queen, while Hathcyn turned to face Angantir. He hewed once at the Swede. Angantir took the blow easily on his shield, and his great sword swung and whistled at the level of Hathcyn's knees, taking off both his legs. The Geat king lay in the red grass, his blood spouting and pulsing from him, and did no more than sigh as Angantir's knife found his throat.

The Geats were defeated as soon as they learned that Hathcyn was dead. They still fought, for it would have meant disgrace and outlawry to have done otherwise. The party with the captured queen were overtaken and killed by Angantir and the men with him; and step by step, the Geats surviving - now no more than six or eight hundred, in groups of a few score - were forced back to Ravenswood, weary, leaderless and demoralized, to the three corpses swinging on the ash tree, and the nine horses' heads on the stakes, dim in the twilight.

As darkness fell, the Swedes withdrew swiftly, encircling the wood. Then began a night of terror for the Geats. Angantir mocked them all night long. In every part of the wood his great voice was clearly to be heard as he poured scorn on them and told them what fate would be theirs when morning came. He needed no rest, borne up both by his enormous strength and by his anger against the Geats: anger which was redoubled when he discovered that his queen had, in fact, been ravished by two of the Geats who had abducted her; and they had used her by no means gently. Hathcyn had known himself doomed, and he had known, too, that the rape of the queen would be a vast affront to the Swede. Such was the turn of Hathcyn's grim humour. A dour man, but a clever one, until he met Angantir; and, even then, he made sure by his odd command at the height of the battle that the Swedish king would not taste the joy of victory to the full. Hence Angantir's wrath.

'... Sea-Geats!' he shouted. 'What are you doing on land, Geat-gannets? Your wings are broken now, it seems to me, and you have left a lot of feathers behind over here. In the morning we will come into the wood after you and give you miserable fools to the ravens. ... And I name this wood Ravenswood, for it will be their home for many a day, after tomorrow. Do you hear, ravens' meat? Ravens' meat! Ravens' meat in Ravenswood!' And so he went on, hour after hour, as the moon climbed the sky and descended again, and the three hanged men were black shadows against the false dawn.

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Then it was that the senior surviving earl of Hathcyn's army exhorted the dispirited Geats in a formal speech. He bade them to remember the times when, flushed with the king's mead and wearing the rings he had given them, they had promised to requite his generosity: the time for the payment of that debt was now at hand. It might be, he said, that

none of them would ever see another dawn, and that the next night might indeed find that they were ravens' meat: that was as it should be. Many Geats took courage from his words.

So, as the dawn came palely, and arrows began once more to sigh through the air, the Geats made their sally from Ravenswood, to repay their mead to Hathcyn. Some rode out boldly, on unscathed horses; they bore the brunt of the Swedish attack, and died swiftly. Some limped forth, with a jest between clenched teeth, stumbling towards death at length, or forming themselves into threes and fours with their backs against outlying trees of Ravenswood; many of these remained standing in death, transfixed by spears driven into the wood. And, while the Swedes were admiring the hardihood of the Geat warriors, some few – a very few – forgetting their debt to Hathcyn, crept or dragged their way out of Ravenswood, and then made the best speed they could to the south-west.

Thus it was that Hygelac's party, riding north-east, with their foot-soldiers toiling behind them, came towards noon on three Geats, who fell to the ground before Hygelac, and saluted him as king. When Hygelac heard their story, he refused to accept their swords, but killed them at once; and then those of his army who were mounted spurred swiftly to meet the Swedes.

Angantir's men were tired by early afternoon, though they had still not killed all Hathcyn's army. As the sun moved round to the south, many of them were remarking that it was a poor business undertaking so much slaughter for so little booty; their arms ached, and they wanted rest and ale. Then, peering into the sun, Angantir saw Hygelac and his warriors riding out of Ravenswood, and for a while he thought that some sorcery had resurrected the Geats who had been killed. Before the Swedes could recover from their surprise, the horsemen were upon them, and Helmwulf had his first experience of real war.

Helmwulf drove into a knot of Swedish foot-soldiers, and, as one of them bent to hamstring his horse, leapt down, landing with his buttocks on the man's shoulders and running him through in one movement. Coming upright, he parried a hewing downward stroke from another Swede, and had the satisfaction of seeing a fierce red-bearded face split into a great, bloody grin as Helmwulf's back-handed riposte sliced into it. A blow on the helmet made him stumble, and he turned to face this third opponent, parrying again, though the sword-stroke jarred his arm. He thrust the boss of his shield at the enemy's face, but this man was a skilled warrior. The Swede jumped nimbly backwards, and chopped at Helmwulf's neck as the Geat lurched forward off balance. The stroke hit Helmwulf's ring-collar, and stunned him for a second. He felt a shocking blow on his back, and lay waiting for death. Then a well-known voice said, 'When you have finished your beauty-sleep, perhaps you will get up!'

Helmwulf twisted round on the grass, and looked up at Wulf, then, rising and grunting as he moved his shoulder-blades to make sure his mailshirt had stopped the Swede's blow, he said, 'Is it thanks to you, then, that I am able to wake up on earth, and not in the hall of the gods?'

Wulf gestured silently at the dead Swede, and held up his sword, Viper. Then, 'Come,' he said, 'we have much work to do. We can tell tales later, here or in some other place. But I am glad that I saved your life, for I think you will do great things some day.'

So they turned, and left the Swedish corpses, without even despoiling them, for that could come later. Looking north, and then at each other, they broke into a run, for Hygelac himself was in danger.

Hygelac had ridden straight for Angantir, slicing and thrusting until, with Eofor and other earls at his side, he had reached the Swedish king and his bodyguard. The battle there was grim indeed, and Angantir's party looked as if they

would again be victorious. But Helmwulf and Wulf were joined by other Geats as they ran to Hygelac's aid, and the Swedes broke off their engagement before the reinforcements could come up, preferring to retire behind their earthwork. As they did so, one of them flung an axe at Hygelac, which passed by the side of his shield and broke his ribs on the right side, so that he fell to the ground in great pain. Then Helmwulf, Eofor and Wulf, with many more Geats, launched an attack at the shield-wall which had been formed in front of the fortification. So hot was the onslaught that they broke the shield-wall very swiftly; then Wulf went through. He aimed a stroke at Angantir, catching the Swedish king a glancing blow on the side of the silver helmet, but the Swede did not falter, so strong was he. He immediately struck back at Wulf, and gave the Geat a sword-stroke in the same place, but a much worse one, cleaving through his helmet so that the Geat reeled back and was taken away to join Hygelac.

The new king of the Geats was lying on a small knoll watching the battle when they brought Wulf to him. It was plain that Wulf had not long to live; he was unconscious, and his brains mingled with the blood that seeped from his helmet, which had been driven into his skull by the force of Angantir's attack.

It was Eofor who avenged his brother. As they carried Wulf away, Eofor gave a loud yell, and leapt forward. The shield-wall by then no longer existed: Angantir and his men were standing on the earthwork. Helmwulf was close on Eofor's heels as the elder man hewed at Angantir. Two of the king's earls lifted their swords as Helmwulf vaulted on to the parapet; they intended to take Eofor in the rear. It was then that Helmwulf discovered his real strength. Dropping his sword and shield, he seized each man by the wrist, and twisted. The Swedes screamed and dropped their swords in turn. Helmwulf drew them to him and held them close, one under each arm, in a terrible grip.

'Let me soothe you while you watch your king die,' he said.

Eofor and Angantir hacked at each other without pause for five minutes or so; but, though the fight was noisy with the ring of iron and the thud of blows on shields, neither could penetrate the other's guard. Yet Angantir, though enormously strong, was tiring, and found increasing difficulty in wielding his heavy sword, which was decorated with gold rings at the hilt. To one of these rings his wrist was tied with a leather thong, so that he should not lose the sword, but the other ring dangled free. A moment came when Angantir, lifting the great sword, rested it for an instant on his shoulder before going in to attack Eofor again. Securing the king's red cloak on his shoulder was a star-shaped brooch of gold, studded with garnets, a piece of Gotland jewellery which the king prized highly: he little knew when he acquired it that it would be his bane. The ring of the sword caught on one of the points of the star, and, as Angantir strove to free the sword, Eofor leaped in, his own blade making a silver flash in the sunlight. Angantir's head flew from his shoulders. The battle of Ravenswood was over.

Helmwulf sighed, and released the Swedish earls, who slid to the earth at his side, and lay still. The surviving Swedes were fleeing while life remained to them, and the Geats began to strip the Swedish dead of their weapons and armour, before looting the camp beyond the earthwork. Then, when they came to the earls whom Helmwulf had been gripping, they were astonished. For the men's bones were broken within them, and the power of Helmwulf's arms had forced their flesh through the rings of their mailshirts.

Eofor himself took Angantir's arms to Hygelac, and was promised a fine reward. Hygelac kept that promise when they arrived home again. But when Helmwulf's feat was reported to him, the king called for Helmwulf to stand out before all his earls. When he had done so, the king said to him, 'Helmwulf, son of Edgethew, I have heard tell of many great deeds done

in battle, and many of them greater than yours in terms of men killed and honour won. But I have never heard of a stranger feat of strength than you have performed. I marvel at it all the more when I recall that you were of no great promise when you were a child. Now it seems to me that you are no longer the same person. Know, then, that from this day forward you are not to be named *Helmwulf*, but *Beowulf*.'

There was a murmur of approval from the warriors gathered round. *Beowulf* was agreed to be an apt name for one with a bear's strength. Much honour accrued to him and to *Eofor* after the battle of Ravenswood, though the greater share went to *Eofor*, who had, after all, killed *Angantir* and avenged *Wulf*'s death. *Wulf* died on the evening of the battle, without regaining consciousness. His brother and *Beowulf* grieved deeply, for he was greatly loved by them. The name of *Eofor*'s brother lived on for many years.

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Hygelac's leeches strapped him up, and the Geats made their way home. There were no more than two hundred men of *Hathcyn*'s army left alive, but some thirteen hundred of *Hygelac*'s. *Hygelac* accepted the swords of his brother's men – at least, of those who survived from the battle and who had stayed on the field – for he held that *Hathcyn*'s death had been well avenged, and took them under his protection. The fugitives who had run away from the battle were for the most part killed by the warriors as they overtook them; some escaped to live miserable lives in disgrace, or found service in the retinues of border chiefs.

After *Hygelac* had been formally enthroned, and when he was well again, *Beowulf* and *Eofor* held the highest places in his hall. To *Eofor* he gave great lands, and a wooden chest overflowing with gold rings, many of them curiously wrought, twisted and decorated. To *Eofor* also he gave the silver helmet of *Angantir*, after his armourers had beaten out the

dents in it and burnished it brightly. Angantir's brooch and sword, however, the king kept for himself, though he removed the rings from the sword hilt, and commanded that all Geats with ring-hilted swords should do likewise. Thus many Geat women were to be seen wearing necklaces made from the rings taken from sword hilts.

To Beowulf Hygelac gave the position of official spokesman or *thyle*. Many of the older Geats murmured against this decision, but as time went on, and it was seen that the young man possessed great skill with words, they agreed that Hygelac had chosen wisely. Beowulf received nearly as much treasure as Eofor, which helped to increase his standing also. Indeed, none of the Geats had reason to complain of Hygelac's generosity: all men praised him for this, and at the same time were glad that the Swedes were so partial to accoutrements and trinkets of gold. If they looked into their hearts they were glad, too, that so few of them had returned from Ravenswood, for the survivors had a much larger share of the booty than they would have been given otherwise.

So Swedes and Geats licked their wounds; and, apart from minor raids and piracies, the hatred between them lay smouldering. More than twenty years were to pass before it burst into flame again.

In the year after Ravenswood, Hygelac made Hygd his queen, and there was a great feast in his hall at Kungsbacka. Ale and mead ran like water, for the bay by Whale's Ness was crowded with ships and there were four hundred guests. Beowulf, to whom much of the formal procedure was entrusted, was generally adjudged to have acquitted himself excellently for one so young; and the wedding feast passed over without the shedding of any blood. Everyone admired the beauty of the young queen, and as for her step-daughter, Swan, she adored Hygd.

Swan was very pretty. Beowulf began to notice this, and one day, chancing upon her behind the brew-house, kissed

her. She dropped the jug she was carrying, stamped on his foot and ran, leaving him to look after her and scratch his head ruefully.

Two years after this incident, Swan married Eofor. The marriage gave Beowulf pain, for he loved Swan. Yet the thought of fighting Eofor for her never entered his head. He prized friendship too highly for that. But he became restless, and sometimes even surly. At this time in his life, he wanted battle, not peace, and he chafed at home in Geatland until a strange tale from Denmark sent him hurrying there.

4

Hroar's coastguards went down to the beach when they saw the strange ship approaching southwards down the bay. The warriors drew up their horses in a line, and held their weapons at the ready until the ship was beached. They believed the seamen came in peace, but they took no chances. They noticed that the leader, though young by his beard, was bigger than most men, and that his crew were beardless youngsters; also that the ship was a new one.

As the crew jumped down from the ship, the coastguards counted them. They were fifteen in number. One of the Danes rode forward, holding up his spear.

'Now,' he said, 'before you come any further, tell me who you are, who come to the Danish realm dressed as for war. I am the coastguard, and for many years it has been my business to see that no ships evilly disposed to the Danes land here. By the looks of your leader, he is a person of great note, for I have never seen a finer warrior than he appears to be, if one excepts Rolf, our prince. But for all that, you had better speak up quickly.'

Beowulf answered just as gravely, for his post as *thyle* to Hygelac had given him a nice sense of the formalities due on such an occasion.

'We are Geats,' he replied, 'and bound friends to the Danes, Hygelac's retainers. My father was Edgethew, a noble of the Waymundings, and I am his son Helmwulf, whom now men call Beowulf, for this name was given me in battle against our common enemy, the Swedes. We come in peace to your lord, Hroar, for we hear that he needs help. You are in a better position than we are to know the truth of that. But a Danish visitor to Hygelac's court has told us that your king's hall and his men are threatened by some unchancy foe who spreads death and terror on dark nights. If Hroar, best of men, requires our aid, we have come to give it.'

Then the Danes rejoiced, and the chief coastguard said, 'You are indeed our friends. Come up to us, and bring your weapons with you: I will take you to the hall.' And he commanded his men to guard Beowulf's vessel, while the Geats marched behind him. They were glad to stretch their legs. Soon they saw Hroar's hall as they approached Leire, and they marvelled, for they had never seen anything like it. It was twice the size of Hygelac's, and it gleamed with gold adornments. A great pair of antlers on the gable gave the building its name, Staghall. The coastguard pointed it out to the Geats, and then, excusing himself courteously, rode back to continue his watch.

The road was of stone flags in various colours, giving a gay effect as it led through the surrounding buildings to Staghall. The Geats passed the outer fortification, then, leaning their weapons against the side of the hall, they sat down on the benches outside, suddenly realizing how tired they were. Beowulf alone remained standing.

A tall man with a wise and kindly face came out of the hall, introducing himself as Wulfgar, Hroar's herald. Beowulf repeated the information he had already given to the coastguard, and the herald went back into the hall, returning after a few minutes and telling the Geats that Hroar would receive them

in their full armour, but that they must leave their spears and shields outside.

Hroar sat under the pillars of the royal Danish throne, grey-haired and with bowed shoulders, a man on whom cares lay heavily. Beowulf addressed the king in greeting.

'Hail, Hroar! I, Beowulf, am kin to king Hygelac and his earl, and my name is known to many. Men of your people have told me that no one dares stay in Staghall after dark, for fear of some monster, troll or I know not what. My king has sent me to you in token of friendship, and because I am stronger than other men, in the hope that I may cleanse your hall for you. Further, I am told that this creature does not go armed, but relies on his strength alone; and I will meet him unarmed myself, to try which is the better of us. One thing only I ask: if I should die in fighting this thing, then my armour should be sent back to Hygelac.'

The Danes looked at Beowulf and his men with approval, and Hroar answered, thanking the Geats for their friendly gesture in coming to Leire.

'I remember your father,' Hroar told Beowulf; 'he killed Hatholaf of the Wulfings. That was almost ten years before I came to the throne. . . . As for the monster which now afflicts us, his name is Grendel. He was a churl of gigantic size, and once worked on a nearby farm. He came here from afar in the north. As you know, if men do not eat enough red meat, they are apt to turn into trolls or werewolves. That is what we think happened to this Grendel, who now visits terror upon us. If my nephew Rolf had been here, he would have undertaken the task of cleansing Staghall; but he and most of my best warriors are away on an expedition against the Franks. Thus we are in no condition to withstand Grendel's attacks. He comes at night, stealthily, a walker in shadow, and he howls before he kills. He bites into men's throats, and drinks their blood - but more of that later! Come now, be seated, all of you, and be most welcome, whatever comes of your visit.'

So the Geats seated themselves at Hroar's board, and food and ale refreshed them, while Hroar's scop played sweetly on the harp, and sang songs of the heroes of old. As the meal progressed, the visitors unbuckled their wargear, and sat at ease, talking animatedly with the Danes and exchanging news. They learned that Angantir's eldest son, Ottar, was ruling in Sweden.

Beowulf thought that Wulfgar seemed very knowledgeable about Swedish domestic affairs, and said so.

'You must know,' Wulfgar explained, 'that I am not really a Dane but a Vendel, from Uppland.'

Beowulf raised his eyebrows in astonishment. To see a Swede in an honoured position at Hroar's court was matter for surprise to him. 'How is that?' he asked Wulfgar.

The herald smiled. 'What do you know of your own antecedents? Not a great deal, I can see.'

Beowulf admitted that Wulfgar was correct, adding that he had been adopted by the Geats at an early age, and that Hygelac had confided little to him about his father Edgethew, saying that he must rest content with the knowledge that Edgethew had been a warrior of great valour and fame.

'We are kin, in a way,' said Wulfgar. 'That surprises you? But Edgethew, your father, was a Waymunding; and the Waymundings are kin to the Vendels. Now we Vendels have always favoured the Danes, and that is why I am here, and you are with Hygelac, for your father detested Angantir's policy of making war on Denmark, so he fought against the Swedes. I am told that Ottar, similarly, wants peace in Sweden now, but that his brother Onela thinks he should continue the war policy.'

'What you tell me is news indeed,' Beowulf said. 'I had assumed that my father's line must have been a branch of the Waymundings which found itself in Geatland, and so allied itself with the Geats. Still, I cannot see that it makes much difference.'

'Not at the moment, perhaps.' Wulfgar paused in thought.

'Much will turn on how Anmund and Athils, Ottar's sons, behave in the future. They are still very young.'

Beowulf said, 'At all events, what you have told me explains one thing, Wulfgar. As soon as I saw you I felt that we should be friends, and now I know why; for, apart from your obvious prowess and wisdom, there is a bond of blood between us.'

Wulfgar was pleased, and remarked that, although young, Beowulf was well able to turn a compliment. Then the king broke into their conversation.

'Beowulf,' he said, 'do not let Wulfgar weary you with his talk. He is a Vendel, and all Vendels talk like old women.'

'I was merely explaining something of Beowulf's ancestry. We have much in common, I find. You may be very glad, lord, that this young yet famous warrior has come to visit you.'

'Of that I have no doubt,' said Hroar; 'I was only jesting. And I find it a most heartening sign that I am now able to make a joke, even a poor one, and at your expense, noble Wulfgar. But I wish to speak to Beowulf of my son.'

Beowulf inclined his head to the king, and moved closer along the bench. A dark-featured man, seated on the steps of the king's high seat, glared at him as the Geat brushed his shoulder accidentally with a foot. Beowulf apologized, receiving a surly grimace in return, and then, ignoring the man, listened as the king spoke in low tones to him. Wulfgar began to relate a story in a loud voice to the man at his other side, so that no one might hear what Hroar was saying to the Geat.

Hroar was concerned for his son, Rorek. He wanted the boy to succeed to the Danish throne; but he was afraid that Rorek might later find himself in danger from two sources. Firstly, Rolf was becoming ever more powerful. Although he spent much time abroad, he was acquiring great wealth and prestige, together with a very large following. Plainly, when Hroar died, Rolf would not be content to remain in the background while young Rorek came to the throne. Secondly, there was Hereward, the son of Heregar, who had been killed with

Rolf's father in the attack on Froda's hall. Heregar had been Halfdane's eldest son, and, because of this, his son in turn had a claim to the kingship.

Hroar concluded, 'Of these dangers, Rolf is the greater, though it pains me to say this. I have lavished care and affection on him, and received little in return. That is my punishment for having neglected my own son, Rorek, though as yet he is too young to be out of the care of women. I have told Rolf so often of his great destiny that he has come to accept it as his right. Yet he is a great warrior, and will be greater.'

Beowulf said, 'I have never seen your nephew, but it has frequently come into my mind that we shall meet. But no man can tell what will be the outcome of our meeting.'

'You two are oil and water,' said the king. 'I hope your meeting will be long postponed.' He shrugged his shoulders, and went on, 'As for Hereward, I have done my best for the boy, but I cannot say that I like him. I am beginning to think I should have had him killed. Yet I am too sentimental for that: he reminds me of my brother Heregar, who was a better man than I am. But the resemblance ends with the face. He has a strange turn of mind for one so young, and he spends much time talking secretly with *spaewives*, though my *thyle*, Unferth, insists that there is no harm in the boy.'

At these last words the swarthy man on the steps looked up, and, hearing his name mentioned, said, 'You were saying, lord?'

'What I was saying was for the ears of Beowulf, this noble Geat.' Hroar was stern. 'Where were you when this party of brave seafarers arrived?'

'Lord, I was about your affairs. Forgive me. So this is Beowulf.' Unferth's black eyes glanced maliciously at the Geat. 'I regret that you arrived before I could greet you formally on the king's behalf, you and your company of children.'

He spoke in a louder voice than that of Wulfgar, so that many Geats heard him, and began to rebuckle their mailshirts,

looking uneasily about them as they did so. Beowulf, mindful of his position as a guest, answered as politely as he could that the young men who accompanied him were admittedly untried. Hygelac had thought it best that only young warriors should go with Beowulf. They would gain experience at sea, for one thing. For another, they would see for themselves something of the greatness of Hroar's court. Finally, the younger generation of Geats would form friendships among the Danes, further strengthening their glorious alliance.

'That was well said,' Hroar observed. 'I have heard that Hygelac made you his *thyle*, and he chose rightly, in spite of your youth.'

'And I have heard,' parroted Unferth, 'of a swimming contest in which Beowulf was beaten by one Breca, who later became a famous chief in the country of the Brondings. So that this Geat who sits by your side may be of less worth than you account him.'

This was too much. Beowulf reddened, retorting that scops who wandered from court to court must have twisted the tale. Then he related what had really happened between himself and Breca. He ended, 'Lord Hroar, if your man here takes the tales of wandering and masterless men for truth, I cannot say much for him. Also he does not seem to have done a lot to help in ridding you of Grendel, about whom I should like to know something more, instead of stupid attempts to pick quarrels.'

Unferth sneered, but evidently thought it better to keep silent, seeing that Hroar was well disposed towards the Geat. Nevertheless the mood of good fellowship between Geats and Danes might have been broken. Some of Beowulf's men were inclined to try to make up for their youth with bumptiousness, and were shouting that Danish blood would be a better drink than Danish beer. Hroar quickly made a sign to his queen.

Walthea came forward, and the shouting died away. She bore a great goblet filled with mead. She took it first to Hroar,

who drank, pledging peace between the two nations; then to Beowulf, who did likewise. As he drank, he looked into the queen's eyes over the gold rim of the cup, and thought that she was the loveliest woman he had ever seen. She was twenty-seven, and in the fullness of her beauty. She had blue-black hair, in which a golden fillet glinted, and her eyes seemed the colour of wood-smoke when the sun catches it.

'Drink well,' she bade him, 'for I think I have never looked on any man with such joy.' She still spoke with a faint Celtic lilt in her voice. Beowulf was wondering what she meant when she added hastily, blushing, 'It is indeed a joyful occasion to see anyone who may rid us of the torment which afflicts us.'

Beowulf made a short speech in reply, saying that he would do his utmost to help the Danes, and the queen moved on, going to each of the warriors in turn with the drinking vessel. Beowulf's gaze lingered on her awhile; then he turned to Hroar, her grey-haired husband.

'Tell me more of Grendel,' he said, and seemed to speak with difficulty.

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Six torches of pitch made six separate pools of wan light in the vast blackness of Staghall. A bat or two flitted from hidden crannies among the high rafters. The drunken young Geat thanes snored in heavy sleep; but Beowulf lay on a bed of wolfskins on one of the trestles, naked, his body greased with bear's fat; he was wakeful, sober and alert. He had made his men couch in a row on the opposite side of the hall: they were the bait. The Danes had crept furtively from Staghall at the approach of twilight. They would have been brave enough in face of a human enemy, but they believed Grendel to be a troll or a werewolf. All men know that trolls are invulnerable by night; and to be bitten by a werewolf is to turn into a werewolf oneself, so either way they were unwilling to stay and watch Beowulf's encounter with Grendel.

A shuddering howl broke the silence of the night. Beowulf's fingers flexed involuntarily, but he remained otherwise still. He remembered what Eofor had said about his 'tree-fighting'. He was now to wrestle with something far more terrible. Again he heard the howling, sounding much nearer. Danes shivered where they lay, noblemen lodging in the huts of churls; Beowulf's Geats snored on. He had made them rolling drunk, so that there would be no fear of their awakening. Again the howl came, and this time it seemed to be accompanied by a noise like the beating of a drum. Beowulf knew afterwards that it was his own heart, but at the moment he took it for Grendel's footsteps. There came a crash as the strong door of Staghall, fastened with bands of iron, burst open; the monster stood in the hall.

He was over eight feet tall, but Beowulf realized as soon as he saw the form in the light of the nearest torch that this was no troll. True enough, he was black, but with filth; and his skin was man-skin, not the stone-hard scales of the troll. Beowulf looked at the thing, and felt faint as the draught from the open door, guttering the torches, blew the stink of rotting flesh to his nostrils. He experienced more compassion than hatred for this being which stood in Hroar's hall while it glanced about, seeking for the meat it craved. It was this lack of fresh meat that had made Grendel mad. It looked around with lost and empty eyes. Beowulf knew that it was no true skin-turner, for it still kept its human form.

Yet it was very dangerous. Grendel turned away to the other side of the hall, and leaped swiftly, moaning as he moved, to where Aschere, a seventeen-year-old stripling, lay by the wall. Grendel bent down and seized the young Geat, he forced Aschere's head back and bit viciously into the throat, drinking blood and holding Aschere's body down as the youth gurgled and died before Beowulf could act.

Beowulf rolled off the trestle, overturning it. As it crashed to the ground, Grendel lifted his head and turned a mask of

blood to confront Beowulf, his hands outstretched. Beowulf gripped one of the hands above the wrist, and Grendel screamed as the pressure of blood burst his finger-ends. He wailed and tugged desperately, trying to get away. It was of no avail. Grendel and Beowulf flailed about the hall; the mead benches, inlaid with gold, were broken away from the posts which supported them. The bemused thanes awoke from their drunken sleep, and crept quickly out of the hall, following the orders which Beowulf had given them earlier.

Grendel stumbled and fell, with the Geat on top of him. Beowulf put on an arm lock, his knees round Grendel's throat, Grendel's arm bent backwards over the Geat's right hip. Beowulf pressed downwards on the wrist; and the thick bone snapped. Grendel shrieked, and with a convulsive effort struggled half upright, forcing Beowulf to shift his position, though he still retained his terrible grip. Beowulf drove his feet under the monster's armpit, and bent his body like a bow, the taut string being Grendel's arm. Then he spanned his body straight; and the hall rang with Grendel's howling, as his flesh was riven asunder; sinew and tendon were torn. A white bone gleamed at Grendel's shoulder; his arm was wrenched from his body, together with the great muscle of the breast; and Grendel lurched out of Staghall, leaving the Geat with the grisly trophy of the arm. His wailing died away in the distance. Beowulf laid the arm down on the floor, and pondered over it. He stayed in the same position for a long time. The Geats came back, and then the Danes, in twos and threes, and waited till Beowulf was ready to speak. At last he raised his head.

'Lord Hroar, Shield of the Spear-Danes,' he said to the king, 'here is Grendel's arm. I should like to have been able to present you with Grendel himself, but he was too strong to hold. I do not think he will trouble you or any man again: he was not by any means laughing when he left your hall for the

last time. Grendel was strong, and he was terrible; but he was not a werewolf or a troll. He was a miserable creature, steeped in sin. His very soul was weary of it, and because of that I overcame him and fulfilled my boast to you. Yet I feel little satisfaction, and much pity.'

Hroar hardly heard Beowulf's words; he was gazing in wonder at Grendel's arm. The fingernails were thick and steel-hard, like the claw of a beast of prey, and the arm was four feet long, black, hairy and filthy. But he tore his eyes away, and answered the Geat.

'A short while ago I thought myself cursed for ever, without hope of relief from care. Now one man has rid me of the terror against which all of us were powerless. Lo! I say that if the woman is yet living who bore such a son, she may count herself blessed by the gods. And you, Beowulf, best of men, shall from now onwards be as a son to me, and Geat and Dane shall be as kin. As to your reward: I have given great treasures, many rings, to warriors for lesser deeds than this, so yours shall be worthy of you.'

The following day, when Beowulf was washed, rested and dressed in rich clothes, Staghall was set in order and the debris resulting from the combat was cleared away. Golden tapestries shone on the walls. The benches were packed with men, for Hroar had ordered a feast to celebrate Beowulf's victory over Grendel. And at the commencement of the feast he made good his promise to reward the Geats.

First, he gave Beowulf a banner woven of cloth of gold; a helmet of silver shaped into the likeness of a boar's head, with large projecting tusks to be used in in-fighting; a mail-shirt ornamented with gold and jewels; and a precious sword with a golden hilt, and magical runes set on the blade. As he presented Beowulf with each gift, the king said, 'Use this well!'

Next, eight stallions were led into the hall before the high seat. All their bridles were inlaid with gold, and on one of

them was Hroar's own costly saddle. Again Hroar said, 'Use these well!' as he gave them to Beowulf.

To each youngthane of the Geats Hroar gave a valuable sword, saying that, though their part had been a passive one, yet it had needed courage. And finally, he gave a man-price in gold equal to six hundred head of cattle for Aschere, which was twice the usual man-price for a young nobleman. Beowulf promised to deliver the gold to Aschere's kin.

So the feast went merrily indeed. This time, there was not even the shadow of discord between the Danes and their visitors, for the oldest warriors among the Danes deferred to the youngest Geats as to heroes. Hroar's scop rose, and said that the magnitude of Beowulf's feat left him for once at a loss for words, but he promised that he would make such a lay out of the combat with Grendel as would make Beowulf famous as long as warriors lived and drank mead in hall. He kept that promise, adding a wealth of invented detail, including a fight underwater in a mere - for he had heard of Beowulf's skill at swimming - during which Beowulf cut off Grendel's head and killed his mother. Furthermore, the scop made Aschere into a Dane. Beowulf himself heard this song some years later, and remarked that the gift of words was dangerous, for the words were apt to run away with the truth. For the present, however, the scop continued, he could do nothing but recount the story of the death of Finn. So the glad sound of the harp arose, and the warriors ate and drank mightily. Then Walthea was commanded to sit at the men's bench, and to bring Rorek and Hereward with her also, that they might do honour to Beowulf. She came, and brought gifts on her own account: a jewelled gold cup, two massive gold armbands and many rings, giving them to Beowulf through Hroar, as courtesy to the king demanded. So, addressing Hroar, Walthea looked at Beowulf with her smoke-blue eyes; and, when Hroar had added her gifts to his, she presented Rorek and Hereward to the Geat.

Rorek stared at Beowulf with round eyes the colour of the queen's, and said nothing: he was overwhelmed. Hereward greeted Beowulf coolly, and asked, 'What spells did you lay to ensure your success, lord?'

'Spells?' said Beowulf. 'I know nothing of spells, and I think you are over-young to bother your head about them, too.'

Soon, Hereward excused himself, and moved along the bench, seating himself next to Unferth. The boy was soon deep in conversation with the swarthy *thyle*. Beowulf noted that Hereward was likely to prove a dangerous man when he grew up, and turned to talk with the queen, while Rorek still gazed at him in silent hero-worship.

'Have you a wife at home, noble Beowulf?' Walthea asked. 'If so, I imagine she must be very beautiful: a woman would have to be so to be matched with you.'

'I have met only two women whom I have wanted to bed with,' Beowulf told her, 'and one of them is the wife of a man who is a great warrior and my friend.'

'And the other?'

'The other is the wife of a great king.'

Walthea flushed and dropped her eyes.

Beowulf went on, 'But as things are at present, they are both safe. I have the old ideas, and friendship and loyalty mean more to me than furtive battles in other men's beds.'

'I suppose they should be gratified to know that - if they believe it,' said the queen.

'It is true for all that,' Beowulf said, and his eyes were like stone. 'I fear that I may be destined to have little luck with women.'

'Fate goes where it will,' said the queen. 'But come now, be merry!' And she pressed him to drink.

So the feast passed off very well, ending by torchlight, while the young bloods sent their hawks at pigeons under the shadowy rafters above.

The Geats spent ten days in Leire, and were royally entertained during them all. Hroar commanded that sports should be held; and, though Beowulf did not take part, his thanes won many rich prizes, and were cock-a-hoop at the delightful thought of the prestige that would be theirs among the junior warriors at Hygelac's court. Beowulf, for his part, spent much time with Hroar, and as little time as he could with Walthea.

On the last day of his stay in Leire, Beowulf went with the king to hunt boar. They killed a fine specimen in a wood some eighteen miles from Staghall; and on the way back Hroar said that he needed rest. Signalling to his retinue to remain apart, he beckoned Beowulf to him and sat down under a wild cherry tree.

'Beowulf, I have a favour to ask of you,' Hroar said.

The Geat leaned on his barbed boar-spear, and waited, watching the king.

'I want you to take Rorek to Geatland and place him in Hygelac's court.'

'That would give me great pleasure, lord, for I have come to like the boy,' Beowulf said; 'and I am sure my king, Hygelac, would raise no objection. But I must ask him first.'

'Do so, as soon as you see him again. Rorek's presence in Geatland will not only strengthen our alliance, but also remove him from danger. And, as I told you on our first evening together, I feel that danger to be a very real one.'

The king then asked Beowulf if he remembered Froda the Hathobard.

'I was only a small child when Froda was killed,' he replied.

'You know that Froda had a son, Ingeld? When my brothers and I went to avenge our father on Froda, we hoped to capture the child as well. But we saw nothing of him. Now I am told that Ingeld is king of the Hathobards, and that Froda's old henchman, Starkath, is exhorting Ingeld to take revenge on the Danes for his father's death.'

‘If it should come to war, Geats will fight by your side.’

‘I have no doubt of that,’ said the king, with some impatience; ‘but I am anxious that it should not come to war. I have lived longer than you in the world, and I have come to the conclusion that peace is best. I shall offer my daughter Frea’s hand in marriage to Ingeld, and try to compose the feud that way.’

Beowulf had spoken to Frea only once, and had dismissed her as a meek mouse of a girl. It never occurred to him to question Hroar’s decision, but he did wonder how she would feel about the proposed match.

‘I am sending Wulfgar to negotiate with Froda’s son,’ Hroar continued. ‘If all goes well, the wedding will take place after Yule this year. You, dear Beowulf, must return then, and you will be one of my most honoured guests. Then also you may take Rorek back to Geatland with you after the celebrations. Thus, by marrying Frea to Ingeld, and by placing Rorek out of harm’s way with you, peace should be assured during my lifetime at least.’

2

The Marriage Feast

A.D. 518

I

FOR over two years Beowulf waited for a summons from Hroar to return to Leire for Frea's wedding, two years during which he fretted moodily at Hygelac's court or made life unpleasant on his farms. His fight with Grendel affected him strangely, for, though he would roar and rage at his thralls, he saw that they were all well fed; and so they put up cheerfully enough with his tempers. Occasionally, at court, he would look at Swan, who was growing fat (for her second child was on the way), and think of Walthea's dark beauty. Although Swan was plump now she was married, her temper was as sharp as ever, and Eofor used to say often that he had to sit on his hands to prevent himself from letting fly at her with his fist before he could lay hold of a birch switch.

Hygelac and Hygd were perfectly matched, and wholly wrapped up in each other. Though Hygd was at first childless, she used to say that her love for Hygelac kept her barren. Swan said that Hygd's Finnish tirewoman and her simples were at the bottom of the queen's childlessness. But Hygd was wise for her age; she no doubt knew that to have a child soon might break the bubble of happiness which enclosed Hygelac and herself. Notwithstanding, she had a son at last, in the year of Beowulf's return from Leire, and he was called Hardred.

Beowulf still loved to walk along the shore, as he had done when young, to the place where the smooth boulders of the

northern coast began to give way to sand. He went out thus one winter morning of red sun and sea-mist.

Suddenly, as he glanced idly out to sea, he stopped, turning pale, and reached for his sword. Through the wreathing mist appeared a great dragon-head, green, gold and black, with a gaping scarlet mouth and monstrous fangs. It vanished, then reappeared again, closer. Then, through a gap in the fog, he glimpsed the dragon's neck, and knew that it was the prow of a ship. This was a relief, but Beowulf kept his sword in his hand, for Geats never adorned their ships with dragon-heads.

He blew the horn which he carried at his belt, to summon assistance, and then hailed the ship, asking the seafarers who they were.

There was no answer for a moment; the dragon ship grounded, and a figure jumped down into the shallow water and made his way up the beach, halting ten yards from Beowulf. The man was tall and gangling, big-boned and limber, with a sea-stained green cloak and a rusty mailshirt. His beard was straw-coloured, and ice glittered in it. Calling to his unseen companions to stay where they were, the stranger addressed Beowulf.

'Are you a Geat?'

'It is not for me to tell you first who I am,' said Beowulf. 'Strangers to this country announce their own identity first. So, though I have a suspicion who you are, you had better tell me at once.'

'You Geats stand a good deal on ceremony - if you are a Geat, that is,' the stranger remarked. 'We have made a winter journey, and for three days have been plagued with this icy fog. I am Rolf, son of Halga, and I have twelve ships out there behind my own. I am looking for Beowulf the Geat, whom my uncle invites to the wedding of his daughter.'

'So you are Rolf,' said Beowulf, slowly.

The other laughed, though his eyes were as pale as the frost on his beard. 'And you are Beowulf?' As Beowulf nodded, the

Dane went on, 'Well, I think no one will be able to complain at that for navigation! Not only do I find Geatland in the fog, but I bring my ship to the very man I want!'

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Hygelac put his arm round his wife's neck as she brought the mead-cup to him, and toasted Rolf. The Dane replied suavely, and the Geats thumped their benches, for Rolf had great skill with words. But Beowulf looked round at the men whom Rolf had brought with him, and decided that he did not like their looks at all. They were a scruffy-looking gang of berserkers, shieldless, and wearing leather jerkins for the most part. Now Rolf was refreshed, bathed and titivated, his yellow hair combed down to his shoulders, he stood out in strange contrast to his thanes, whose eyes gleamed from unkempt birds' nests of matted hair. One of them, Vott by name, was almost as big as Grendel had been. He snored now stertorously in his drink, his chin on his platter at the edge of the board, while pendulous ropes of saliva dangled almost to the floor from his slack lips. Beowulf made a sign, and a servant dragged Vott away from the table. Rolf raised an eyebrow at Beowulf, but made no comment, continuing his conversation with Hygelac instead.

'- I, for my part,' he was saying, 'think that the disrepute in which many fools appear to hold the gods these days is very unwise. As you may know, lord Hygelac, the circumstances of my own birth resemble those of certain of the gods: Frey, for example, whose father married his own sister -'

Hygelac nodded bemusedly. He had drunk a lot in honour of Rolf, and found difficulty in following the thread of the Dane's talk. Rolf, himself, gave the impression that the Geats, as provincials, were sitting there to be hectored.

'- and I take the part of the gods myself,' Rolf went on, with wonderful conceit, 'especially in regard to the ritual observances. Think of what happened to On the Old.'

'On the Old?' said Hygelac. 'He was Ottar's grandfather. know all about him. He -'

'On the Old,' said Rolf, portentously, ignoring the fact that the Geats all knew the story, and determined to tell it merely to prove his point, 'was promised by Odin that the sacrifice of one of On's sons every ten years would have the effect of extending both On's life and his reign for another ten years. Nine sons he killed; and Odin kept his promise: On was still living, though men had to feed him with milk from a horn like a baby, so weak was he. And when he thought to sacrifice his tenth and last son his wits had begun to wander, too, so he proposed also to dedicate all of Uppsala and the surrounding district to the god. The people rose against him, and forbade the sacrifice, so On died at length. As the scop says:

At Uppsala, Old On the Cruel
Sent to Odin's hall nine sons
and bought with his knife ninety years.
So long he lived, he had to suck
milk from the deer's horn with toothless mouth;
at last Death found him, struck him down
slow yet sure, in Uppsala town.'

Beowulf looked at Rolf. 'I think you will not die of On's sickness,' he said.

The irony was lost on Rolf. 'I should think not!' he said indignantly, 'I am much too devout for that. Whatever else I may do, I will never slight Odin. On was an old fool.'

'What would you have done, lord?' Hygd asked sweetly.

'I should have spent the first ten years begetting sons on all and sundry, and I should still have been alive and kicking today! Old On wore himself out when it was too late.'

Rolf's men, and many of the Geats, raised a huge shout of mirth at this. Beowulf thought what a contradictory character Rolf was. He was a hard man to get the measure of. He was

very particular about his appearance, yet he surrounded himself with evil-smelling and half-mad berserks, most of them incapable of sustaining any sort of conversation, let alone one of the kind which Rolf seemed to like. Yet his warlike reputation accorded well with the companions he had chosen. Of one thing alone Beowulf was certain. That was that to Rolf, the greatest hero in the world was Rolf.

‘And that is what perturbs me about this marriage of Frea and Ingeld,’ Rolf said.

‘What,’ said Hygelac, ‘that Ingeld will wear himself out?’

‘No, no,’ Rolf said impatiently. ‘Simply that Froda was touched by Odin, and I do not like the idea of this way of buying peace from the Hathobards. To do them justice, many of the Hathobards like the idea as little as I do, especially the older ones who remember my father and his brothers – and me, for I killed Froda when I was a boy. They think that an alliance between Hathobards and Danes would be unlucky. It took my uncle’s herald, Wulfgar – you know him, of course, noble Beowulf? – close on two years to persuade the Hathobards even to consider the question, though Wulfgar is golden-tongued (a Vendel, needless to say!). However, Ingeld came to Leire last summer, very reluctantly, and merely out of a desire to spy out the land for a future attack, I expect. But to everyone’s surprise, he and young Frea fell wildly in love. So the marriage will take place this spring; and I am here to invite Beowulf to be Hroar’s guest and the representative of the Geats at the wedding.’

Another contradictory element in Rolf’s character was his lack of the formality which was to be expected from a Danish prince. He had made no formal speech to Hygelac on his arrival; and Hygelac had taken this rather amiss, since it had been up to Rolf to state the reason for his visit; however, the Geat court had been so astonished at Rolf’s berserkers as they slouched into the hall and pushed themselves into places at

the board, bellowing for food, that Hygelac had thought it best to pass the matter off politely. He decided to take this last speech of Rolf's as the one which had been lacking, and made a courteous if rather rambling reply, thanking Rolf and accepting the invitation on Beowulf's behalf.

The noise in the hall was growing every moment, as those of the berserkers who were not utterly stupid with drink were laughing, telling loud stories and singing bawdy songs. The ships' crews, as distinct from the berserkers, were quiet and well-behaved, on the whole, and Beowulf began to guess something of Rolf's cunning. He enlisted competent, efficient seafarers, but kept the band of berserkers about him to ensure his remoteness and aloofness from the others. Thus, no one in his entourage could possibly vie with him, or contend with him for power; the berserkers were too unintelligent, while the rest were of too lowly a station to be accepted as a leader.

Rolf leaned over towards Beowulf, shouting above the din. 'I have two messages for you.'

'I shall be pleased to hear them.'

'The first is from Unferth. He said, "Tell the lord Beowulf to bring men with him to the wedding, not boys."'

'I will remember that,' said Beowulf, 'and I will give him my answer when we meet.'

'The second message is from the queen. She said, "Say to Beowulf this riddle:

Fate goes where it will;
And, if it will
What I will,
You will
Hear tell
Of Froda's mill.'"

Beowulf pondered, but he could make no sense of Walthea's message. The trouble with the Celts, he thought, was that

their riddles tended to be too enigmatic; and also, he was uncertain whether it was a riddle or no; the queen might have pretended that, in order to fool Rolf.

'Can you understand it?' Rolf asked, curiously.

'No. Everyone has heard all about Froda's mill. I cannot understand it at all. Does Hroar know the queen sent this message?'

Rolf's pale eyes glanced speculatively at the Geat. 'Hroar? I think not. My dear uncle is so taken up with his peace-making that he is scarcely able to comprehend the talk of ordinary men, let alone a cryptic message like that one, even if Walthea told him about it, which I doubt. She gave the message to me in Hroar's absence. The king, I think, is entering his dotage before his time. All this babble about "peace is best! - " '

'I begin to feel that Hroar may be right,' Beowulf said shortly.

'Come now! You, a hero of Ravenswood, slayer of Grendel, to talk like that! You surprise me, noble lord.' Rolf's lips curved with amusement.

'When I killed Grendel -' the Geat began, and then fell silent, as he brooded. His own early years had given him pity for the small and the weak; but the fight with Grendel had taught him that the strong, too, are sometimes to be pitied. He did not want to become like Grendel, a mere mindless slayer with an empty soul. Yet what was a man to do? He must win booty to win honour, and how could this be accomplished save through blood? He sighed, and fiddled absently with his drinking horn.

'I still think Hroar may be right,' he repeated, at last, looking down at the board, and keeping his eyes from the incarnation of the manly virtues that was Rolf. 'But I agree that it is against all reason. Yet I talked to Hroar before I left Leire after the business with Grendel. Your uncle made me feel only half a man, he seemed so wise. And I have often thought

about that; but I have come to no final conclusion. I only think he *may* be right; I do not say that he is.'

'You will see,' said Rolf. 'Uncle is getting silly.'

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At Hygelac's invitation, Rolf stayed for six weeks. He sent his twelve ships back to Denmark after a fortnight, a gesture which Hygelac appreciated, for this both relieved the strain on his hospitality, and provided a warrant of Rolf's trust in the Geats. The berserkers, however, who travelled in Rolf's own dragon-headed ship, stayed behind; and Hygelac remarked privately to Eofor and Beowulf that sometimes he thought that the entertainment of twelve shiploads of unexpected guests would have been preferable to one shipload of berserkers. Eofor suggested that they should be kept drunk all the time, as far as possible. This was an excellent plan - or would have been, had it not turned out that several of the berserkers went raving mad after a prolonged drinking bout. One Starolf, a squat, pig-eyed fellow, caused Hygelac a few moments of terrible anxiety. At table one evening, Starolf jumped up, reeled to the king's high seat, and seized Hygelac's glass drinking bowl, his most treasured possession. Placing it on his head, Starolf cavorted round the hall with a sword in his hand, daring any Geat who thought himself a man to take the bowl from him.

'I wear no helmet but a glass one,' he boasted, 'yet who will try to spill my brains?'

No one dared to face Starolf, not so much through fear of the Dane as through fear of Hygelac's wrath should the bowl be broken. But Rolf called to Starolf.

'Come to me, Starolf, and let me see your pretty helmet,' he said.

Starolf hopped and lurched towards Rolf; and, as he came close, he passed the huge Vott. At a nod from Rolf, Vott tapped Starolf hard behind the ear with the hilt of a sword;

and Rolf leaped forward, catching the bowl as it fell from Starolf's head. Rolf kicked Starolf in the throat as he lay in the rushes; then, turning, presented the bowl with a graceful apology to Hygelac.

After that episode, Hygd suggested that her Finnish woman-servant should be asked to help. The Finn gave Hygd some powder which, when mixed with the berserkers' drink, sent them into a state of bovine vacuity during the evenings.

Yet the berserkers were a nuisance, for all that. In the daytime, some of them would shut themselves up in the hut which had been allotted to them, light a fire of henbane and apple leaves, and breathe the fumes. They would be found hours later, eyes open and rolled upwards, lather on their lips, locked in the arms of each other or of some Geat serving maid, according to their inclinations. All in all, Hygelac was heartily glad to see them go, although he gave them a thick gold ring apiece as a parting gift.

2

Six hundred guests made the sign of the Hammer. Ingeld and Frea sat close by Hroar and his queen; Ingeld, dark, slight and pale, smiled courteously and pledged Hroar as the Danish king finished his speech and the toast to Thor was drunk. Ingeld was polite enough, but at first there had been some constraint in his manner, as was only natural, since there was blood between him and the Danes: the blood which Hroar hoped to wipe out by the wedding.

Hroar smiled benevolently back at Ingeld, then raised his voice. 'Now,' he commanded, 'let Dane and Hathobard keep the peace together for the nine days of this feast. King Ingeld is excused from replying to my words, so let the merriment begin!'

And Hroar's jesters came tumbling down the hall; soon men of the two nations, together with Beowulf's Geats, were laughing at their antics.

Starkath, Froda's old lieutenant, took a long pull at his mead, and spat thoughtfully across the table into the fire. Then he watched the young king and Frea. Starkath remembered the day when he had returned to a hall in ashes and a dead king; and Ingeld, a squalling black-haired baby, brought to him by a nurse from a churl's hut. He thought, too, of the long years in which he had kept the idea of vengeance before Ingeld: twenty years eaten up by a smile from a quiet brown girl! There they both were, besotted with each other while Froda's ghost wrung its hands in Hel. He thought, too, of Froda's treasure. Starkath had been at great pains to hide it. He had embarked with a shipload, manned by Frankish mercenaries; and he had returned alone as a passenger in a merchant ship. None but Starkath knew the full tale of that journey; and none but he and Ingeld knew where the treasure was. The thought that Ingeld might tell Frea about it made his mouth tighten, and his still white, strong teeth shone in a grimace. Vengeance and gold, he thought; vengeance and gold!

Had Starkath known that Ingeld had told Frea of the treasure during his first visit to Leire, things might have turned out differently.

Hroar was expounding a little pompously on the greatness of the Danish nation, and explaining how his own marriage to Walthea had enabled the Danes to enrich themselves through the amber trade, which had been the jealously guarded preserve of the Celts since the Roman power had begun to make itself felt. His marriage to a Celt had gained him valuable concessions.

'So, you see,' he ended, 'many good things may come of marriage, especially of mixed alliances.'

Frea was smiling quietly to herself. Walthea caught the smile, and knew the reason for it. For Frea had told Walthea about the treasure, too.

Beowulf was sitting close to Rolf.

'Where are your berserkers?' he asked the Dane.

Rolf simpered. 'I felt they might be a trifle out of place here, so before I came to see you I asked Wulfgar to take them raiding in Öland with twenty ships. I am told they have been gone six weeks or so - Well, what do you think of this little gathering?'

Ingeld, his hand in Frea's, was wondering how, when the fuss over the wedding had died down, his wife would like the country of the Hathobards. His flesh yearned for her, and he gripped her hand more and more tightly, until at last she gave a little moan, and withdrew it from him.

Rorek was sitting at the men's table for the first time in his life. As still as a mouse, he gazed about him, and from time to time the thought of leaving Leire caught at his throat; but as often, he was consoled by the knowledge that he was going to Hygelac's court with Beowulf.

Hereward, some places higher up the table, was feeling proud, for he was to receive arms on the day before the feast ended. Unferth was watching him with a sly smile.

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On the first night of the feast, Ingeld hurt Frea, for his love for her was so strong that he forgot to be gentle. Men heard them, and, waking their wives, chuckled, 'Froda's son is grinding to better purpose than his father.' And Ingeld slept at length by the side of Frea, who was still whimpering from time to time. And he dreamed of a mill with blood splashing from the quern; and awoke, screaming in his turn, until Frea calmed him and he slept, his head pillowed between her small breasts.

On the third night of the feast, Ingeld and Frea had begun to take joy in each other, so Ingeld was curt and offhand with Starkath when the old warrior spoke of revenge. Yet the words stayed in his mind, for all that.

The same day, Unferth talked long with Rolf and Hereward, and afterwards the boy sought Ingeld, who sat in the women's

quarters with his shoulders against Frea's knees, having his long black hair combed. Hereward looked contemptuously at the Hathobard king.

'Lord Ingeld,' he said, pretending a respect he did not feel for this man whose duty was to avenge his father, and who married into the family of his father's slayers instead, 'you have had many gifts of great worth, I know. But I have a gift for you which you may not think poor, for all that I am young, and have not yet received arms.'

'You?' said Ingeld, amused. 'And what is this gift?'

'It is for your ears alone.'

'Oh, very well.' Ingeld disliked Hereward intensely, firstly because he was the son of Heregar, and blood was between them; and also because he had realized intuitively that Hereward held him in contempt. But he decided to humour the boy, and followed him outside.

'Lord, would you know what the future holds: how rich you will be, how happy? Command me, and I will show you.'

'What fools' talk is this?'

'Come with me this evening, and I will show you the future.'

Ingeld was about to dismiss the boy with a clout on the side of his head, when Unferth came along the passage. The Hathobard determined to make sport of Hereward, and called, 'Unferth! this cockerel here says he can show me the future. What prodigies do you Danes nurture in your hall, eh?'

But Unferth did not laugh with Ingeld; he regarded the young king gravely.

'You do ill to mock him, lord,' he said solemnly. 'He has great knowledge for one so green in years; and I, for one, am honoured to call him friend.'

'Do you mean in all seriousness that he can tell me the future?'

'Not I, lord,' Hereward broke in; 'but I can take you to those who will.'

'This is not an opportunity I would advise you to miss,' said Unferth to Ingeld. 'At best, you would see that which it is given to few men to see, and at worst, you would gain some amusement.'

So Ingeld agreed to go with Hereward, on condition that Unferth accompanied them, that evening. When he told Frea, she begged him not to go, but he turned stubborn, and left her.

*

Rolf joined Hroar and Beowulf in the meadow. Rolf had a hawk on his wrist, and a great hound at his side.

Beowulf greeted Rolf, and said, 'I have seen fine hawks, and fine hounds, but never have I seen a pair like yours. Truly, they have found an owner worthy of them, however.'

Rolf flushed with pleasure. 'The hawk is Habrok. He is a fine hawk, as you say.' He unhooded the bird, and its fierce gold-circled eyes stared madly, its feet gripping into Rolf's double wolfskin gauntlet, while he spoke softly to it. It settled down eventually, its feathers fluffed out slightly, for there had been a frost and the air was keen. The dog stood immobile by Rolf's side. 'And this is Gram,' Rolf said, 'but do not touch him!'

'Gram bays grim by the cave of Gnipa:

The leash is loosed, and the monster leaps free,'

quoted Beowulf, and the allusion was not lost on Rolf, nor the pun, either.

'He is Gram, as you said, and not Garm,' Rolf acknowledged, 'but you changed the name with justice, for even though he is my own, I must admit that he is the nearest to a hound of the gods that men have ever seen on earth.'

'Hound of the gods?' said Hroar. 'Hound of Hel, without doubt. I detest the creature. But as long as Rolf keeps him

under control, I must say that he gives no trouble at all.'

'Well, lord Hroar, I should like to show Beowulf what Habrok and Gram can do, if you permit us - unless you would like to accompany us?'

Hroar excused himself, and Beowulf rode with Rolf to a marsh. Soon, they put up a few brace of teal. Swiftly, Rolf unhooded the hawk again, shouting, 'Habrok!' as he slipped the jesses. The hawk mounted rapidly, towering a moment above the ducks, then stooped, struck and killed. Rolf loosed the hound, and, as it went to retrieve, swung the lure of rabbit fur. Habrok left the kill at once, and swept back low, over the dog's head, hitting the glove with a thud and a swish.

Gram brought back the teal.

Beowulf grunted with admiration. The creatures were perfectly trained.

'May I fly your incomparable hawk? Would he fly for me?' he asked.

Rolf looked at him with a wanly quizzical twinkle in his eyes. 'Certainly he would. But I should not advise you to try. The hawk will come only to my glove. Every man who has tried has ended up with no eyes, and holes right through his cheeks. Habrok will accept no man's glove but mine unless I place him there; and if you fly him, he will come to your face.'

Beowulf shuddered. 'In that case, I will forbear.'

Rolf giggled. 'Habrok and Gram are not of Hroar's persuasion, you see.'

The Geat kept silence. He was now convinced that Hroar's policy of peacemaking was the correct one. The old Dane had impressed him with his integrity of purpose; and, further, the marriage feast was passing off so well, as far as Beowulf could gather, that it seemed to furnish proof that peace was, after all, best.

*

Walthea was playing backgammon with Rorek, and Rorek was winning.

'What will the Geat court be like?' he asked her.

'I have no idea. Why not ask the lord Beowulf?'

'I have done. He says I must wait and see. Do you think there will be gold on the roof of Hygelac's hall? I wonder where I shall sit at table?'

Walthea sighed. 'You must ask Beowulf these things.' She moved a counter of bone. 'Keep your mind on the game, Rorek, or I shall beat you yet!'

'I wish we could both win,' the boy said, suddenly. 'And - oh, I wish you could come to Hygelac's court with me!'

Walthea leaned across the board and hugged him, sobbing, 'And so do I! Oh, and so do I!'

'Look, you've spoilt the game!' Rorek said, when she released him, and he began to cry, too.

*

That evening, Unferth and Hereward led Ingeld over Leire brook and past the dark masses of the barrows where long-dead kings of the Danes held sway, to a lonely spot where an aged spaewife sat on a chair before a cave, with foul old women screeching a song of rat-squeaks and owl-hoots around her, their faces seeming all cratered and eyeless in the dim torchlight.

'Who is this?' said the old woman; and Ingeld was amazed, for her voice was the voice of a young girl. The hags about her fell silent.

'Great lady,' said Unferth, 'this is Ingeld, Froda's son, king of the Hathobards and son-in-law to Hroar. He would learn something of what is to be, if you will vouchsafe this. Hereward you know.'

'Indeed, yes. Hereward, come to me, dear!'

Ingeld shivered as Hereward went forward unafraid, and kissed the spaewife long on the lips, like a lover.

'You shall be our cupbearer, sweet,' she said to Hereward, and called for ale.

'Drink first, my love! Then king Ingeld will know we mean him no harm.'

Hereward raised the cup to his mouth, and took a long draught, then walked to Ingeld with the remainder. 'Drink, lord, it is good ale,' he said, and his eyes seemed to have grown larger in the gloom. 'Drink, or she will take it amiss.'

Ingeld drained the cup. The ale tasted excellent. 'Thank you, mother,' he said. 'I am afraid I have left none for Unferth.'

'No matter,' Unferth waved an uncaring hand, but a glance passed between him and Hereward. 'Now that you are satisfied, I can drink from another cup.' So one of the old women brought ale to Unferth, and he drank deeply, wiping his beard afterwards with a sigh of repletion.

'Now, lords, if you are refreshed,' said the incongruous voice, 'what is it that Ingeld desires of me? - Ingeld, Froda's son, king of the Hathobards and son-in-law to Hroar! There's a mixture, heh!'

'Dear one,' said Hereward, while Ingeld winced at the endearment the boy used to a woman who looked at least ninety; 'dear one, lord Ingeld was persuaded by me to visit you in the hope you would show him something of what is to be.'

The spaewife considered a moment. 'Snug on a dark night, Hereward, I may have spoken to you of powers at which you guess dimly. But I do not think the future is for Ingeld to see. Not unless he gives me a gift.'

The women were singing again, and as they sang the spaewife's features seemed to dislimn, and then reform, younger, more beautiful. The song ceased, and she was an old crone again.

It was a trick of the light, Ingeld told himself, a trick of the light. Yet his hand fumbled for his sword, and to reassure himself, he spoke harshly. 'Tell me of this gift, and then show me what you have to show me, or I will cut off your head.'

'The gift will be given, never fear. I will refrain from asking for it now, however, since you seem impatient, and I will allow myself to be overborne by your command. Look, then, behind me at the cave; and you, Hereward and Unferth, turn away and do not look, on your peril!'

So Ingeld looked at the cave. He saw Frea lying in bed; and so real was the apparition that he would have gone forward, but he found he could not move. She lay there, her brown hair tumbled about her shoulders, and he could see the gentle rise and fall of her breasts in sleep. Then, like a striking snake, a sudden tongue of flame stabbed at her bed-coverings; and flames were all about her, while her mouth opened and shut in soundless screams. She took the flame into her lungs, and lay back, writhing on a bed of fire, oreoled for a brief moment as her hair shot into flame, then a pitiful, squirming heap of black flesh. Ingeld pitched forward insensible at the spæwif's feet. The old woman laughed musically as Hereward and Unferth, turning, picked up the Hathobard king, and, with one of his arms round each of their shoulders, took him away, his feet dragging. 'Do not forget my gift!' she shouted after them.

They revived Ingeld with distilled mead in Staghall, and pressed him to tell them what he had seen, feigning great interest and solicitude. But he would not say a word. And when Starkath found his king and spoke again of revenge, Ingeld raised tortured eyes to the warrior, tearing his thoughts away from the burning body of his wife, and echoed the word. 'Revenge,' he said in a flat voice, where before he had said it mockingly. Starkath placed a hand on his king's arm and kept it there for a moment, then left him. Ingeld would come round, he thought, priding himself on his persuasive powers.

That night, Ingeld said nothing to Frea of his visit to the spæwif. But the thought tormented him, so that he turned to her, thinking to assuage his anguish with love. But he found himself quite impotent; and he lay in the darkness, his eyes

wide open, while Frea moved her body against him and murmured hot words of passion. At length she desisted, with a sigh, and went to sleep, while Ingeld remained awake all night.

Hereward, for his part, had also been unmanned by the drink he had shared with Ingeld; but, being young and unmarried, he did not discover this for some time. When he did, it was the beginning of his hatred for Rolf, for the plan was Rolf's and Unferth's, and they had told him that the drink would be harmless, merely containing a powder to predispose Ingeld to see what the spawife had in store for him.

*

Beowulf and Hroar noticed that Ingeld was looking paler than usual, and had little to say for himself. When they mentioned this to Rolf, he laughed, and said to Hroar, 'Your daughter is a quiet brown vole, all right; but it is my experience that looks can often be misleading. I warrant she leaves Ingeld with little inclination for daytime liveliness.'

Hroar laughed, too, and said, 'Ah, well, you see my plan is succeeding, Rolf. Danes and Hathobards will be fast friends from now on.'

During the days that followed, and the nights of increasing estrangement between Ingeld and Frea - for Frea thought that Ingeld was ceasing to love her, and he, for himself, was afraid of being humiliated again - Starkath exhorted Ingeld incessantly to take the vengeance he owed his father.

'Why do you delay?' he said. 'I have told you for close on twenty years that your father is waiting to be avenged. You deck out your bride with jewels, while we old ones who remember Froda must weep for shame, while pretending to smile. You seem to hold your enemies in honour. I cannot understand you, lord Ingeld, my friend. I have known the old ways, when a man lived hard and kept his honour, but - and you force me to speak plainly, since I regard you more as a

son than as a king – you have sold honour for lust, and you wallow in bed with the daughter of one of the men who caused Froda's death. Have you no shame at all? Have you not had all you want from the woman?’

Ingeld's breath was indrawn sharply.

‘Well?’ persisted Starkath. ‘Does she satisfy you still?’

‘I – ’ Ingeld began.

Starkath crowed with triumph. ‘Oho! I, Starkath, am getting on; but I know the ways of men and women. Come now, finish with her, and take your revenge!’

‘I love Frea.’

‘You *cannot* love a Dane! You *cannot*! Why, lord, it is a wonder to me that you are capable of anything at all with her, kin as she is to those who killed your father.’

Ingeld's face was expressionless.

‘Listen, lord. You see Rolf?’

Rolf was seated halfway down the hall, cleaning some weapons, while Beowulf lounged on the bench beside him.

Starkath went on, ‘Can you see that axe whose blade he is burnishing? He handles it as though he loved it, doesn't he? Ingeld, that is the axe with which he cut your father to pieces!’

Ingeld's teeth drew back from his lips involuntarily in a snarl, and he half-rose to his feet.

‘No, lord, not yet.’ Starkath restrained him. ‘One thing more. Hereward is to receive arms tomorrow. Do you know what gift Hroar will give him to go with the rest of his weapons? Froda's sword, Ingeld! *Your father's sword*! Won't he look fine, the young Danish bantam, strutting in hall with the blade that Froda – ’

A cry broke from Ingeld; and, as heads turned their way curiously, Starkath patted the young king on the back to make it appear that he had been attacked by a fit of coughing. ‘Quiet!’ he hissed. ‘Now. You will take your vengeance?’ As Ingeld nodded in agony of mind, Starkath unfolded his plan, and Ingeld listened. But ever and again the vision of

Frea's charred thighs squirming in a smouldering bed came before his eyes, and Starkath had to repeat many of the details to make sure that Ingeld had grasped them.

'Very well,' Ingeld said at last. 'We will do it. But we must take Frea with us. I - we can do that, you see. Things would be altered if we were away from the Danish court, I am sure. You accuse me of callousness towards my father's memory. It is not that. Well, I will take my revenge, but Frea must come with us afterwards. Then I am sure all will be well - Starkath, it will be daylight, won't it?'

'Eh?'

'Daylight when we do it.'

'Of course. Hereward is to receive his arms at midday.'

So Ingeld decided to exact payment for Froda's death, and to prove the spaewife wrong. Frea had been sleeping in her bed in Staghall, that much he had glimpsed in his vision, of the appointments of her room. He would stay awake by her side all night. He was getting used to that, he thought wryly. And then, the next day, when it was all over, they would be away from Denmark before dark, and she would be his again to enjoy with an unclouded mind, once she had been brought to see that he had to do his duty by his father's memory. Starkath agreed that Frea could be regarded as a prize of war, though he was reluctant to do so at first, so steadfast was his detestation of all Danes; and he quite ignored the fact that Ingeld was married to Frea already, so that she was a Hathorbard in consequence.

Ingeld succeeded in keeping awake that night, though the reaction now that he had made his decision made him terribly weary. He comforted Frea, saying that he had not been himself lately, and that things would be well again when he was back in his own hall. So she was contented, and they kissed, and Frea went to sleep like a child in Ingeld's arms. He lay un-sleeping, but found in contrast to the previous nights that his spirit was calm and undisturbed.

3

Beowulf had not taken to Hereward, but he felt indulgent towards the boy as he watched Rorek and the older lad from his seat on the bench outside Staghall. It was the bench on which Beowulf's men had sat on the day of their arrival in Leire to rid Hroar's hall of Grendel. Well, he thought, things were safe enough in Staghall now. As for Hereward, today was the first day of his manhood, for Hroar was to arm him as a man for the first time. Beowulf smiled in the sun.

Hereward was tired of being followed by Rorek. 'Can't you leave a man alone?' he asked importantly. 'Go and play with the women.'

'You aren't a man yet,' Rorek reminded him. 'Not till this afternoon, at least - Hereward, what will you do when you grow - I mean, when you are a warrior?'

'I shall become king of Denmark.' Hereward's face was quite serious.

'But that is impossible! Even if Hroar died, Rolf would be king.'

'Rolf will not live for ever.'

'And I am next in line after that.'

Hereward grinned. 'You are going to become a Geat.'

'I'm not, I'm a Dane! I'm only going to Hygelac's court to learn things that a prince of the blood should know.' Rorek was upset.

'I know a lot of things, baby Rorek, and I know that one day I shall be king.'

Hereward was speaking the truth. The spæwifë had told him that he would become king, and he believed her. He went on, 'And when I am king the first thing I am going to do is cast a spell that will shrivel you up!'

Rorek took to his heels and ran sobbing to Beowulf, while Hereward strolled on, thinking with delight of the afternoon.

Beowulf told Rorek rather sternly to stop crying.

'I hate Hereward!' the boy exclaimed. 'Beowulf - I mean - lord Beowulf, I shall be glad to come with you when you go. Only - ' he paused.

'Yes?'

'I do wish my mother were coming too.'

'So do I, lad,' said Beowulf, 'so do I.'

*

Hroar was in Walthea's chamber in the women's bower. 'My love,' he was saying to the queen, 'tomorrow all the Hathobards will be gone, and Frea with them. She has behaved in an exemplary way, considering she is only in her fifteenth year, I think.'

'So was I, when you carried me off,' said the queen. 'And I longed for my home for years. We Celts suffer from homesickness terribly. I hope Frea takes after you and not me in that respect, for you roamed gaily enough when you were young, by all accounts.'

'And founded the prosperity of Denmark because of it,' Hroar reminded her proudly. 'The feud with the Hathobards was the only serious obstacle in the way of peace, after the Geats killed Angantir at Ravenswood. When Rorek is with Beowulf and out of danger, I shall be able to grow old happily. Why, what is troubling you?'

Walthea was staring at the wall. 'Freah, and then Rorek,' she said. 'You may grow old happily, but a woman needs children about her.'

'Come, this is no time for sadness. It is the last day of the feast; and, besides, Hereward receives arms. Be cheerful! We have found peace at last!'

*

The environs of Staghall were packed with Hathobards, since those freedmen and others who were not of noble birth

professed great interest in the young Hereward, and wanted to greet him as he passed through their ranks on the way to the hall. Besides, since it was the last day of the marriage feast, Hroar had decided to feed them royally, and the great fire sizzled as the spits turned above it and the smell of roasting meat set mouths watering.

Inside the hall the nobles waited, and Starkath drank his ale with relish. Two hundred Hathobards sat among the Danes, with a sprinkling of Geats here and there. Hroar sat on the high seat; to his right were Rolf, Beowulf and Rorek. Walthea sat at his left hand, with Frea. Ingeld was to have sat opposite Rolf, but he had excused himself, saying that he wanted to see the ceremony without getting a crick in the neck, and he was sitting down the board, close by Starkath. Unferth sat on the steps by Hroar's feet, his official position when he was discharging the duties of *thyle*.

The buzz of conversation ceased as Unferth arose. There was a deep growl, and Beowulf realized for the first time that Rolf had brought the hound Gram into the hall with him. Habrok was sitting hooded on Rolf's gloved left hand, also. Perhaps Rolf had brought them in to do honour to Hereward – he surely would not give either of them away? – or perhaps he was going to show their mettle in hall later on, to give the Hathobard nobles a display to talk about on their way home.

Unferth was speaking sonorously and well. He touched on the marriage of Frea and Ingeld, but in such a way as could give no offence, and went on to state the business that was before them. He blew a horn.

'Lord Hroar, best of men, Shield of the Spear-Danes, Helmet of the Scyldings, greatest giver of rings by the Two Seas,' he intoned, 'the young lord Hereward, son of Heregar, comes now to be your man.'

The hoofs of Hereward's horse were heard in the courtyard outside, together with a great cheer from those who were assembled there, and all eyes in the hall turned to the entrance.

Frea's head was hurting. The anxieties and the perplexities of the last few days had been a strain; and now, the pomp of the ceremony, which ordinarily she would have enjoyed, was too much for her. She slipped away to the women's quarters, and lay down on her bed, closing her eyes gratefully. She had drunk wine, as had the rest of the women, and she fell gradually into sleep.

No one, not even Walthea next to her, had seen Frea go: they watched as Hereward came into the hall, making his horse rear in a rather ostentatious fashion just within the doorway. Then his groom led the horse forward past the fire and round in front of Hroar. Hereward slipped from its back, and bowed to Hroar. The horse was led away again.

The king unbuckled his sword-belt, and passed it to Unferth, who handed it to Hereward to hold in token of submission.

'Be loyal,' the *thyle* admonished Hereward; and, to the king, as the sword was given back to him, 'be gracious.'

'Lord Hroar, I am your man,' said Hereward.

Then, item by item, Hereward's war-gear was passed from Hroar to Unferth, who accoutred the young man. A golden helmet was placed on his head, a mailshirt inlaid with silver was buckled on his chest. A round shield, bronze-bossed and reinforced with iron, he slipped on his arm, and a spear of ash, richly carved and with a gold inlay on the blade, was given into his left hand. Finally, he buckled on his sword-belt, with a sax at his right side and an empty sheath at his left.

The sword was lifted by Hroar and given to Unferth. The *thyle* led Hereward round the board till the two men stood at the king's side. Unferth gave the sword back to Hroar, saying once again, 'Be gracious.' And Hroar placed the sword in Hereward's sheath, addressing the young warrior for the first time directly. 'Be loyal,' he said; and, embracing his nephew, made room for him at the table between Rolf and himself.

An ear-splitting clamour now broke out in the hall, as men

applauded; and even Beowulf, who disliked Unferth, was moved to lean over and shout to him, 'By Odin! but that was well done, Unferth.'

The noise diminished as Unferth blew the horn again, as a signal through the din that the feast should commence.

Walthea noticed at this point that Frea was missing, and was about to remark on the girl's absence when Beowulf spoke to her. He was at her side, and she did not know how long he had been sitting in Frea's place. The row had diminished a little, but they were still able to converse without fear of being overheard. She flushed, for Beowulf had never sought her directly before, having seemed to avoid private conversation with her.

He said, 'You sent me a message by Rolf, lady.'

'Yes?' Her eyes were downcast.

'I am a dullard. I have repeated your words a hundred times, but I am still far from understanding them. Can you be plainer with me?'

Her heart was hammering, and she spoke with a tremble in her voice: 'You have given me little opportunity, lord Beowulf. Confess now - you have kept away from me. Why?'

Beowulf smiled sadly. 'Two years ago I told you that I kept to the old ways. That is why: that and my great regard for your husband, who is a king.'

'But a man may talk, for all that.'

'And a man may dig his grave with his tongue as he talks.' Beowulf was stern again, and his mood bruised the queen. 'Let me say this: while Hroar lives, I may not speak openly to you; and so it is better, perhaps, that your riddle should go unsolved. For Hroar is my dear friend who, I hope, will live longer than On the Old.'

Walthea spoke with bitterness. 'Hroar is ready to make sacrifices, just as Cruel On did, though it is peace that Hroar would have. He is willing to sacrifice Frea and exile my son in order to have peace. Peace! a slow nodding by the fire till

life goes out like ashes! Lord Beowulf, I am a Celt, and Hroar took me when I was young. Did I ask for that? He took me in war, and left my father gobbling in the grass, tripped by his own entrails. Well, I have served Hroar, and done my duty, but my duty to Hroar is ended.'

'Your duty to Hroar ends with your death, or with his, not otherwise,' Beowulf said. 'Duty is all.'

'And love?'

'Love, lady? Love is sweet, but two churls sweating in the straw know as much. Duty is more bitter, yet a man's honour does not rust by it.'

'Tell your wisdom to Ingeld.'

'Ingeld is the laughing-stock of the world. Even the Danes know what his duty is, as you would know if you heard the songs they sing outside this hall.'

'Yet,' said Walthea, 'by denying this almighty duty, and by Hroar's persuading Ingeld to its denial, peace is assured. How do you account for that, wise Beowulf?'

Beowulf snorted, between mirth and anger. 'Oh, I am caught in a net of women's words,' he said. 'Let me drink here peaceably at your side, at least.'

Walthea said, 'Then my message must remain unexplained;' and, suddenly remembering her daughter, she added, '— but where is Frea?'

Her question went unanswered. There was a clamour outside the hall, a bustle, and then Wulfgar stood in the entrance, Rolf's berserkers at his back.

Rolf, Beowulf, and many Danes went forward to greet Wulfgar and bring him to Hroar, who was smiling. Wulfgar was popular with everyone, even, it appeared, with the berserkers, who shambled quietly in after the Vendel. The hound Gram followed Rolf as he walked to the doorway, but Beowulf noticed that the hawk was hooded and immobile on a servant's fist by Rolf's place at table.

As Rolf stood, his hands on Wulfgar's shoulders, Beowulf

overheard Rolf saying, 'Wulfgar! you have come in time, then!'

Wulfgar seemed puzzled, asking, 'In time, lord?'

At that moment, Unferth called the newcomers over to the king, so there was no time for further talk. Hroar greeted them, and Wulfgar made a fitting answer, telling the king of the booty they had won in Öland, and excusing himself for having interrupted the feast on the double occasion of Ingeld's wedding and Hereward's coming to manhood. Then he and the berserkers seated themselves.

The Hathobards looked glum. Starkath rose from his seat by Ingeld.

'I am a plain man, as you know, Hroar,' he said, 'and I want to get on with my ale-drinking. But first I have a request to make.'

As Starkath spoke, Rolf moved casually down the hall to where Walthea and the other women sat.

Hroar said to the Hathobard, 'You and all your countrymen will be well rewarded later this day, Starkath, and so I cannot think what your request may be. But tell me.'

'I know we shall have our reward,' said Starkath. 'This is only a small request. May we see more closely the arms which you have given your nephew, Hereward? It seems to me that I have never seen a young warrior so well fitted out, and I for one should like to be able to take home a fuller description of how the Danes arm their young men and equip them to win fame.'

Hroar was pleased and flattered by this speech, for Starkath had paid scant attention to the Danish king before, so he ordered Hereward to send his helmet, shield, spear, and sword-belt down the table. Each warrior exclaimed in envy and admiration at Hereward's good fortune and Hroar's kingly generosity. Then, when the weapons came to Starkath, the tough old Hathobard lifted the sword-belt and drew the sword.

'Truly, a man may do good things with this,' he said, and those who were close to him saw that tears stood in his eyes. 'It is a fine sword, worthy rather of a king than of the nephew of a king. There are runes set in the blade.' His voice rose: 'Who can read these runes?'

'I can.' Ingeld spoke, and leaning over the table, placed his hand as it were by accident on the spear. He peered at the sword, and in a strong, clear voice said, 'The runes read "I am Biter, Froda's blade."'

'Froda's blade?' Starkath shouted. 'Bite then, Biter!'

And he swung the sword, killing a Geat next to him, while Ingeld hurled the spear up the hall at Hroar, yelling, 'Here is payment for the death of Froda!'

Rolf sprang to the king's side, snatching up a great trencher as a shield, which the spear split. But its course was deflected, and it passed harmlessly between Rolf and Hroar. Hereward dived after it and used it as a stabbing spear after snapping the haft off short, for he was otherwise weaponless.

The other Danes, and the Geats, were taken quite by surprise by the ferocious Hathobard attack. Beowulf found himself hard pressed at once, for many Hathobards wanted the honour of killing so famous a man; and it took him several minutes of fierce fighting to clear a space about himself for a moment. How fierce it had been he could judge by the fact that he had no real recollection of what he had been doing. As he paused, panting, with the bodies of four or five Hathobards and the wreckage of a trestle at his feet, he saw, farther up the hall, that Rolf was hacking a way out for the women. The wall splintered as Rolf finished his work with two or three sidewise strokes of his axe and a few lusty kicks; and then Walthea and the other women were bundled to comparative safety through the gap.

Unferth had climbed up a pillar, gaining the rafters, from which position he was picking off Hathobards one by one with arrows. The rest of the scene was in turmoil for a while, but

presently some sort of pattern began to emerge, when the weaker of both sides had fallen or fled. There was a group by the king's high seat, with Hroar and Rolf side by side, Hereward a little behind them. There was another group having Ingeld and Starkath as its centre, half-way down the hall; and nearer to the doorway were Wulfgar and the berserkers.

These last two groups were working their way towards each other, and Beowulf leaped in to try to reach Ingeld or Starkath, but Hathobards were too thick about them for that, and he found himself fighting desperately on the fringe of the struggle, while the berserkers hewed their way up the hall with Wulfgar among them.

Suddenly, resistance against the berserkers seemed to slacken as they warmed to their task. Ingeld became separated from Starkath and the other Hathobards in that group, and had to retreat swiftly across the floor. Then he gained a respite, for many of the enraged berserkers turned from the main combat and ranged the hall, harrying and killing the Hathobards until those who were left broke for the doorway in terror, and were pursued outside by Danes and Geats, into the confused struggle in the courtyard, and beyond its outer fortification. In the *mêlée*, the central fire was scattered, and the tapestries on the wall flickered with flame, just as they had done long ago in Froda's hall.

The only berserkers still within were Vott and Starolf, fighting side by side with Wulfgar and Beowulf against Starkath and three other Hathobards. Unferth had emptied his quiver and was still perched up above, watching the fight and casting a wary eye from time to time at the fire below and behind him.

Vott cut low at Starkath, opening a great wound in his hip, and then swung his sword back-handed, taking off Starkath's head, which was a noteworthy feat, for it is difficult to behead a man back-handed. So died the most implacable of the Hathobards, and a brave man whom his enemies honoured after his

death, because he knew where his duty lay, and did not scruple to try to carry it out. He was Froda's man, and he died with Froda's sword in his hand, trying to avenge his lord. Vott swore afterwards the strong white teeth were still gnashing with hatred as the head rolled on the floor.

Beowulf killed his man just in time to see Wulfgar fall, while Starolf, bestriding the body, protected it as Vott slew the Hathobard who had struck Wulfgar. Vott won great fame that day. All was over, or nearly so, for by the high seat Hroar, Rolf and Hereward still survived; and Ingeld was staggering with a dripping sword on his way to meet them. He was wounded in the stomach, and in great pain, yet some of Starkath's spirit lived on in him.

The flames had run past Ingeld on their way to the women's bower. Beowulf, rising sadly from Wulfgar's corpse, saw Ingeld falter and halt, and made ready to intercept him if he should turn and try to escape.

But escape was far from Ingeld's wish. He was filled with a dreadful fear. He was remembering the spaewife's vision, and realizing for the first time with sick horror through his pain, as he gazed at the flame-filled passage to the bower, that it had not been dark in that vision, but daylight, broad daylight. . . . The walls of Staghall seemed to swing and turn, and there was a sound in Ingeld's ears which might have been the grinding of a mill.

Ingeld sobbed, trying to move more quickly and pass the Danes.

And then Beowulf saw a frightful thing. Rolf had Habrok on his fist again, and as Ingeld hesitated and then moved forward with dragging steps, Rolf flew the hawk, laughing. The bird soared up and across with deliberate wingsweeps, then, leaning back on the air with tail feathers outspread, it struck precisely and with terrible force at the young king's face, into his eyes and cheeks. As he dropped his sword, screaming, there came an echoing scream from Frea's chamber.

An incoherent cry broke from Ingeld's lips as he beat at the hawk, trying to dislodge it. He took two or three steps forward again.

Rolf laughed once more, and loosed Gram, saying, 'That crow will damage my Habrok. Let us make an end!' and the great hound bore Ingeld to the floor, savaging him and tearing at the wound in his belly, while Habrok fluttered, shifted position, and was still again.

Hroar had been standing like a witless man meanwhile, tears streaming down his cheeks. Now, with war instead of peace, with his hall burning about him like Froda's so long before, and with Froda's son dying the death of a hare, he gave a cry and ran forward, thrusting his sword through Ingeld's heart. It broke his own.

He said, in a slurred voice, 'Now perhaps Froda's mill will grind no more,' suddenly looking a very old man.

As he finished, his eyes protruded, he panted for breath and his lips turned blue. He made vague gestures in the air, sawing at it with his free hand. Then he fell by the body of his son-in-law, causing Habrok to flap his wings angrily, though he would not leave his prey.

Unferth slid down his pillar and Beowulf, with the two berserkers, joined the Danes in silence. The hawk still stood, heraldic on Ingeld's head.

*

Hroar's scop sat on the stone flags of the courtyard, and wept when Rolf's berserkers carried the king's body out of Staghall. Rolf followed, dragging the mutilated corpse of Ingeld by a leg. Beowulf, who had brought out Wulfgar's body with Hereward, was struck by a sudden thought and ran back inside, coughing and with smarting eyes. He paused for a moment, getting his bearings in the smoke, then hurried to where Starkath's body lay. The sword Biter was close to the headless carcass, and Beowulf picked up Biter, then ran out of the hall again, gulping down the cold air gratefully. The

sounds of battle outside the main fortification had died away, and soon one of Rolf's men came to report that all the Hathobards were dead or had escaped.

The dusk began to fall, and through the scop's keening Beowulf said to Hereward, 'Here is Froda's sword. Do not despise it because it was treacherously used. Starkath was a brave man, and did his duty, as did Ingeld in the end.' And he gave the sword to Hereward.

Beowulf felt bitter towards Rolf, and did not speak to him. He suspected that Rolf had guessed something of the Hathobards' intentions, and that the timely arrival of the berserkers was no coincidence. Though he could not very well hold that against Rolf, for without the berserkers the day would have gone badly for the Danes, he felt that Rolf should have taken him into his confidence. But he was very angry over the death which Rolf had given Ingeld. Yet Beowulf kept silent, and did not upbraid Rolf. One thing the Geat knew for certain: the throne was vacant, and he wanted Rorek and Walthea well out of the way while the succession was decided. He promised himself that he would sooner tread on an adder's tail than trust Rolf in anything, whatever happened. So he turned instead to Unferth, saying, 'This sword-play reminds me of your message to me. I had forgotten all about it till now. From your perch out of harm's way you had leisure, no doubt, to observe whether those I brought with me this time were boys, or men.'

Unferth did not relish Beowulf's gibe about the safe position he had assumed during the battle, but decided to ignore it for the time being, and merely answered grudgingly, 'They were men.'

'Well,' said the Geat, 'for the most part, they are the same companions who came with me here to meet Grendel!'

Rolf laughed at Unferth, and the counsellor's face darkened with wrath. But there was much still to do. They went down the paved pathway. Rolf and Unferth had to count the dead

and the living, and then arrange makeshift quarters for the hall-retainers and the women and children. Beowulf had to look after the Geats, and then find Walthea and Rorek quickly. The scop was left alone before Staghall.

The great hall collapsed as the roof fell in, sending brilliant showers of sparks roaring into the twilight air, and bringing the scop to his feet with the sudden blaze of poetry in his eyes. His own mood forgotten, or caught up in a universal feeling, he strode among the debris in the courtyard, his robe singeing and stinking from the sparks as he began to declaim on the fitness of Frea's funeral pyre. After a day or two's polishing, and the addition of a good deal of moralizing on Hroar's folly in trying to wipe out blood by marriage, and an account of the doings of the chief combatants, the poem was complete. During all this time the scop was about the only happy man in Leire, Rolf, perhaps, excepted.

4

Hroar was buried with much pomp after his cremation, and mounted warriors sang dirges about his mound. It was not until two days after the ceremony that Beowulf learnt where Walthea and Rorek were. He had been thinking over the events of the marriage feast, and had begun to admit to himself that Hroar had been wrong, and Rolf right. War was best, not peace; and therefore any man who wanted war should have it, including Rolf, if necessary. But first Beowulf must find the queen and her son. A desperate search on the night of the battle had revealed nothing: the queen and Rorek had disappeared. Then, after Hroar's funeral, when Beowulf was walking a couple of days afterwards through an ill-favoured alley of huts, a hiss made him turn his head, and he followed a beckoning slave into one of the stinking dwellings, where a ragged woman was suckling a piglet in the straw and mire of the floor.

The slave asked, 'Are you the lord Beowulf?'

'I am.'

'The queen told me to say that she is at her farm near Redbeck. I came to the court to tell you on the day of king Hroar's burial, but one of lord Rolf's men turned me away, for the queen told me not to give the reason for wanting to see you to anyone. So no one would let me speak to you.'

'Could you take me to this farm?'

The slave shook his head dubiously. 'Lord, I am only a slave, and bound to this land. I know nowhere else. The queen spoke to me during the fighting, and I tried to find you then, but could not. Do not be angry with me, lord - I did not know what to do.'

Beowulf gave the man a coin which left him gazing at it in wonder and scratching his bird's nest of hair, then turning with a shout of joy to his woman. Beowulf went quickly to the stables and ordered a groom to make his horse ready; then he armed himself and rode out of Leire.

A mile or so from Staghall, Beowulf was directed to Redbeck by a freeman farmer. It was dusk when he finally arrived at the farm, and knocked, shouting to those within to open.

A hooded figure came to the door. He knew at once that it was the queen, though her face was in darkness: no woman but she could have come to the man's-door at the front.

'Dear lady,' said Beowulf, 'I have found you then. The slave you spoke to was a dullard, though an honest man, and I did not know where you were until today.'

'Come in, Lord Beowulf,' the queen said.

He entered the hall, and Walthea called for torches, and for meat and ale for the Geat.

A curious formality had fallen between them. Walthea in particular was very reserved: it was as if Hroar's death had erected a barrier between them. Ironically, Walthea had often,

before the battle, caught herself wishing for the king to die in order to remove that barrier. She had ceased to love him when she had known she was to be parted both from Frea and from Rorek.

‘Lady, what will you do now?’ asked Beowulf.

He felt that they had been skirting the question long enough, when they had been talking an hour or so with elaborate courtesy.

‘I? Live here – as long as Rolf lets me,’ said the queen, bitterly.

‘You do not trust Rolf? No more do I. Now listen. Rorek was to come with me to Hygelac’s court. He must still do so. Even if, with my help, you were to succeed in putting him on the Danish throne, he would not last a month when Hygelac recalled me to Geatland. No, Rorek must come away with me. He will be safe until he is grown up, and more able to take care of himself. And Rorek will be happier with his mother, so you must come too, if you will.’

The queen’s mouth curved wistfully. ‘Can that really be?’

‘It can. You must return to the court, with Rorek. It may be dangerous for a few days, but I am convinced this thing must be done openly. You will make a formal announcement renouncing Rorek’s claim to the succession till he comes of age. And then we will go. Hygelac will make you welcome, and will accord you the honour due to a queen.’

‘I will do as you say, Beowulf,’ Walthea answered submissively.

Beowulf left matters where they were then, for he was tired. He slept in the hall alone.

Walthea lay awake in the women’s bower. She, too, had sensed the unease between herself and the Geat, and admitted that now that Hroar was dead, she had lost her capacity to tease Beowulf. Had she really loved Hroar? When he had captured her, she had hated him at first, biting and scratching

when he came to her, but gradually schooling herself in docility over the months of homesickness among an alien people. After she had quietened down, Hroar had treated her with unvarying kindness. Yes, all in all, he had been very kind, she thought, and slid into sleep with a sigh.

*

When Beowulf escorted Walthea and Rorek back to Leire the next day, they were all warmly greeted by Rolf, whose own hall, some two hundred yards from Staghall's ruins, and a much less pretentious place than Staghall had been, was now housing the court in cramped quarters. To Beowulf's surprise, neither Rolf nor Hereward had made an attempt to seize the throne, but were sitting together with Unferth, apparently on the best of terms. Rolf was never a hasty man. He exerted himself to be pleasant to Beowulf, with the result that the Geat was soon modifying his opinion of Rolf.

'Dear Beowulf,' he beamed, 'the debt of the Danes to you grows every day. You have found the queen and her son for us!'

After some talk in that strain, it was difficult to remember how Rolf had laughed when he cast the hawk at Ingeld.

'It was not difficult,' Beowulf said. 'A slave told me where they were, so I went to reassure them that all was safe again in Leire. You were occupied with pressing matters, and so I took the task upon myself.'

Hereward, too, was all smiles. 'My uncle and I have been concerned for your safety. And I, to my shame, did not thank you for braving the fire in Staghall to fetch me my sword.'

'That was nothing,' said the Geat. 'That sword is too good to perish in fire. But you must have Froda's name excised from the runes, and your own substituted. By the way, do you remember when Starkath stood up and asked who could

read runes? I had no idea that Ingeld could read, any more than I can, except for one or two names like Froda's.'

'No more could he,' said Rolf. 'It was all worked out between Starkath and Ingeld beforehand. They were talking together while I was cleaning my weapons further down the hall. But sound carried better in Staghall than they knew, and I caught enough of their conversation to conclude rightly that they were planning an attack. I did not hear when it would be, though; still, who but a fool could fail to reason that out?'

'You are too modest, lord Rolf,' said Beowulf. 'I had no suspicion what would happen.'

Rolf laughed, and said, 'Neither had anyone, except for Hereward, Unferth and myself. Do you think the feast could have been carried on in a natural manner if everyone expected an attack? No: it would not have worked that way. All I could do was to hope that Wulfgar and my berserkers would come in time to turn the balance decisively in our favour, and to place myself so as to be able to get the women safely out of the way. It was a pity, though, that Hroar had to die like that - and a pity, I think, lady,' he put in to Walthea, 'that you missed his funeral. Of course, we ourselves understood that in the confusion of the battle you had to think of your son, and act on your own. But I must tell you frankly that you are not popular in Leire. Many of the common people are murmuring because you were not present to see Hroar laid in mound.'

'Then,' said Walthea, and Beowulf noted with joy that the old light was back in her eyes, 'all is for the best.'

'I am sorry, lady, I do not take your meaning.'

'Rolf, I am to accompany Rorek to Hygelac's court with Beowulf.'

'Oho!' said Unferth.

Rolf silenced him abruptly. 'Be quiet!'

Walthea went on, 'My son is next in line of succession to the throne. But he is a boy still, and not yet fit to be a king.'

Therefore I am taking it upon myself to renounce his claim to the throne until he is a man, and has taken arms. He will leave as soon as we can make ready.'

Rolf's cup was full. He exuded happiness, for now he thought that only Hereward stood between him and the throne.

'Lady,' he said, 'I think you have chosen rightly. I will say no more, except that in the lord Beowulf you will have a worthy escort for a queen, and you shall depart with all due honour. More, Hroar's coffers have not yet been touched. They are the property of the king; but, since we have no king as yet, I - and I am certain Hereward will agree with me here - will see that you take with you one half of all such treasure as may be conveniently carried by ship. Thus both you and Rorek will be able to live well among the Geats, and you will be able to take fitting gifts to Hygelac besides.'

After Walthea had thanked Rolf for this gesture, Beowulf spoke.

'One thing more,' he said. 'During the marriage feast Hroar told me that after his death, his arms and armour were to be given to me to take to Hygelac, in token of friendship between Danes and Geats.'

'The armour was buried with Hroar, and the weapons, too - or such of them as were found when we searched the ashes of Staghall,' said Rolf.

'Not this armour, I think. This was the splendid armour of Heregar, and his weapons. Hroar said that these things were safe in his treasury. Heregar promised Hroar before the attack on Froda's hall that Hroar should have them, and so he took them after Heregar's death. Now they are to go to Hygelac.'

'But they were my father's,' protested Hereward. 'I do not remember having seen them; but if two such men as my father and Hroar wore them formerly, then I think I should have them.'

'They were Hroar's, and now they are Hygelac's,' said Beowulf, simply.

Unferth interposed, 'I agree with the young lord Hereward here. After all, as he says, they were his father's. Also, I should like to persuade Beowulf to say nothing of this to Hygelac for another reason. Beowulf, Hereward lost all his fine arms and armour on the day of the battle - all except for his sword.'

'I rescued the sword Biter for him,' the Geat reminded Unferth.

'I know that,' said the *thyle*. 'But nevertheless, it is a galling thing to lose one's arms on the day of their granting. Will you not change your mind?'

'I cannot,' said the Geat. 'I am Hygelac's man.'

'And quite right, too,' Rolf put in. 'If Hroar said that these things were to go to Hygelac, then to Hygelac they must go. I will arm you myself, Hereward, and I do not think you will have cause to complain of my generosity. Come now, no more of this!'

And Rolf forced a change of subject, bringing Walthea back into the conversation; but Hereward sulked and drank too much. At length, feeling himself in need to prove that he was a man, he left the company and went to bed with a serving maid. She was a Finn, and well skilled in love, but Hereward could do nothing with her. He went to sleep, telling himself that he was too drunk, and tried to take the girl again in the morning. But it was no use. He decided, very perturbed, to see the spaewife.

*

When Hereward visited the spaewife's cave, it looked very ordinary, and very dirty: not at all the sort of place in which one could expect to see the vision that Ingeld had seen. The singing crones were absent, and the old woman was alone at the back of the cave, fondling something and talking to herself.

'Unna!' said Hereward, at the entrance. 'I want to ask you something.'

'Why, it's my love, Hereward!' cried the spaewife. 'The dear who brought me my reward for showing Ingeld a little bit of the future! Old Unna is pleased to see you. Look, here is the reward you gave me!' And she held out the object in her hands to Hereward.

'It smells,' he said, waving away the head of Ingeld. The flies had blown it, and it was already decomposing. 'I have no wish to see that again, especially after the trouble I had to get it while Beowulf was not watching - But listen! What was that drink you gave me and Ingeld?'

Unna gave him a sidelong glance. 'A quietener,' she said. 'Something to calm his nerves so that he could see that which I had to show him.'

'A quietener? And it quietens something else besides the nerves, doesn't it?'

Unna chuckled, and said nothing.

'Doesn't it? Answer me!' Hereward shouted.

The spaewife sighed. 'Very well: yes, it does. You will have the truth. Here it is. During the rest of your life you are destined to feel desire on only one occasion; and, however that may be, you will be no good to a woman for the rest of your days. Yet here is consolation for you - you will be king of Denmark because of the potion you drank!'

Hereward stared at her, his sax drawn, yet hesitating to kill Unna.

'Now hear me!' Her voice had changed: no longer the cackling old hag, she was imperious. 'The gods give with one hand, and they take with the other. I told you long ago that you would be king, and so you will be. But who are you to know the colour of the thread that the Spinners spin? A leaf falls from the tree Yggdrasil in autumn; and in the spring a nation dies. Who can trace the thread that binds these two? Froda lusted after gold, so Halfdane died; so Halga, Hroar and Heregar killed Froda; so Ingeld tried to kill Rolf and Hroar, and died. And you helped to spur Ingeld on to his

revenge, in your way. You shall be king because of that, but not yet. Be patient, Hereward, be cunning; wait!

And with that Hereward had to be satisfied.

*

Unferth was deep in conversation with Rolf.

‘Do not trust Beowulf, lord,’ he was saying; ‘for he sees himself already as king of Denmark.’

Rolf looked pensive. ‘I would not go as far as to say that.’

‘But I would. Consider: he is going to take Rorek away with him, and the queen. Anyone with half an eye can see what he wants with Walthea; but Rorek? What do you think he will do when he gets back to Geatland? Why, he will raise an army, and attack us with his full strength, while we are still weak after the battle against the Hathobards. Then, if he beats us, as he probably will, he will put young Rorek on the Danish throne, and act as regent himself, with Walthea sitting by his side. He will be king in everything but name; and in name, too, if Rorek should meet with an easily contrived accident. And remember also that he is of Vendel stock, a Waymunding. He is almost a Swede!’

Rolf got up and paced restlessly about. ‘There may be something in what you say,’ he admitted, at last.

‘Of course there is! I was Hroar’s counsellor for many years, and if Denmark is a great nation now, I must claim some part in its rise to greatness. I know the way men’s minds work, lord Rolf. To be safe, you must kill Beowulf, and Rorek, and Walthea.’

‘Very well. They shall die.’ A smile twisted Rolf’s lips. ‘They will leave us on the day appointed for their departure, but for a different destination, shall we say?’

And he called his berserkers, giving them certain instructions and telling Vott to pass on to the coastguard those orders that concerned him.

*

Of the young warriors who had accompanied Beowulf to Leire and had been with him on the previous visit, only seven were still alive, though the crews of his other ships had fared better, few of them having high enough rank to have sat in the hall for the marriage feast. Two days before Beowulf's party were to leave, the Geat went down to the sea to make sure that all had been made ready as he had commanded, and to supervise the loading into his own ship of the treasure which Rolf had sent for Walthea and Rorek.

As he was setting a strong guard on the treasure ship, the coastguard came close to him.

'You look to have a scant crew on your own ship, lord Beowulf,' he said. 'I remember the day when you and your young heroes came stepping on to the shore, and I knew then that our deliverance from Grendel was at hand, because I had never seen a more promising man at the head of a war party. And now your numbers are cut down, which saddens me greatly. I should be even sorrier if no Geats were to leave Leire, which seems likely.'

Beowulf glanced sharply at the Dane. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that the lord Rolf is going to have you all killed before you leave. Vott has been to tell me this, and has ordered me to see that none of you escape. If I were you, I should clear out quickly tonight or tomorrow night, for the feast to honour your going is to be your death, and Walthea's, and Rorek's, to say nothing of what is left of your men.'

'What is your name?' Beowulf asked.

'Olaf.'

'Then, Olaf, I am in debt to you for my life, and your reward shall be anything that you request, within reason. But in a way you have behaved badly. If you are Rolf's man, why do you tell me this?'

Olaf's eyes flashed. 'I was Hroar's man, and now I am no man's,' he said proudly. 'I have taken no oath of fealty to Rolf.'

'In that case, you have done well, and I apologize. Forgive me.'

'That is nothing. As to my reward: take me with you. You are short of men, and I will gladly serve Hygelac under you.'

Beowulf said nothing, but unbuckled his swordbelt, and handed it to Olaf, who held it for a moment in token of submission, and then gave it back to Beowulf.

'Now I am your man, and Hygelac's,' said Olaf, 'and I am glad of it.'

'And what about your own men?'

'They will do as I tell them,' answered Olaf. 'Most of them feel as I do, that we have always been treated unfairly by those in office at the court. We never get to know anything of what is going on; we miss half the feasts and nearly all of the honours; and we have to stop out here in all weathers, gazing out to sea at times when all men in their senses are snug by the fire. My men will do as I say, and if you want them, you will have full crews for your ships.'

So they sealed a bargain, Beowulf promising rich gifts from Hygelac to all the absconding Danes when they arrived in Geatland.

*

That night, Beowulf talked secretly with Walthea, telling her of the treachery which Rolf was planning, and informing her that they were to leave under cover of darkness the next night, with the help of Olaf the coastguard and his men.

On the following day, Beowulf gave Rolf a jewelled casket full of treasures; and Rolf, as the host, had no option but to load the Geat down with far more costly gifts in return. Indeed, thinking that he would recover all these presents, he gave more than custom demanded, besides bestowing on each of the Geats who had taken part in the defence of Staghall a fine sword and a dozen heavy gold neck-rings. All these things Beowulf sent under guard to his ship.

In the evening Beowulf made Rolf and Hereward drunk.

Then, when everyone had gone to bed, he allowed some time to pass before re-arming himself and stealing softly to fetch Walthea and Rorek. On the way he remembered a thing he had to do. Creeping past the men snoring on the trestles, he made his way to the cubicle in which Unferth slept. He hit Unferth hard on the temple and then, gagging and binding him, carried him outside and round the back of Rolf's hall to the midden. He threw Unferth in, wrinkling his nose against the intensified stench. It was an unpleasant death, but one which he felt Unferth deserved. Then he went stealthily through the women's door to Walthea's chamber.

By the light of a single torch burning on the wall by her bed, Beowulf saw that the queen was dressed. She woke Rorek quietly, and whispered to him that they were going to Geatland with Beowulf, secretly, and that he must not make any noise. The drowsy boy soon had his clothes on, and the three fugitives slipped into the hall. As Beowulf passed each Geat, he touched the man's foot.

Walthea, turning outside the hall with Rorek, waiting for Beowulf to come up to her, saw the rest of the Geats following him. They crept through the sleeping town and gained the shore, where Olaf and his men were waiting.

'The ebb tide is making,' said Olaf. 'Come now, aboard!' There was an exchange of murmured signals, passed from man to man in the darkness; then, the huge stone anchors discarded, the mooring ropes were stowed and the ships stole out to sea, each under four pairs of muffled oars which, combined with the tide, were enough to give seaway.

5

Beowulf and Walthea found their love together one night as the ship slid like some shadowy water-bird under the stars. At first, they had remained reserved and withdrawn, Hroar's death still holding them apart. One day, however, Rorek

sighted a school of porpoises, which soon frolicked round the ship as others had done when Beowulf had sailed out to sea with Breca in Hathcyn's boat. Rorek peered through the shield-wall, then stood on a rowing-thwart to get a better view, clapping his hands and shouting for joy. The breeze sent his yellow hair streaming and fluttering out like a pennon; and as he laughed in the sunlight, all youth and promise in his face, Beowulf and Walthea turned to each other, and their eyes met. Then, that midnight, when the watch had fallen asleep for a while and when the midships fire was dying, flesh and spirit would no longer be denied. Both the man and the woman rose at the same compelling instant from their separate sleeping places, like ghosts in the darkness, and turned again towards each other. In the faint light from the neglected fire their two shadows approached, joined, and sank down once more into the blackness with a shuddering sigh.

3

The Ice in the Heart

A.D. 521-536

I

AFTER his marriage to Walthea, Beowulf built a hall for himself and his bride close by Hygelac's, for he knew that since his wife had been a queen, she would not accept a subordinate position in another man's hall unless she knew that she had her own, in which she was sole mistress.

Rorek was happy in Geatland. He was a shy boy, but doggedly persevering in learning anything new; and, in contrast to many of his type, he was an agreeable companion, plastic enough to adapt himself to his company. Hygelac noticed this, and asked Beowulf whether he thought the boy was weak-willed.

Beowulf laughed. 'Rorek weak-willed? A month after he came here, he was speaking with no Danish accent at all. No, lord, he is not weak-willed, but he has learned very young that it pays to blend with one's surroundings. The ptarmigan is white in winter, and the hare in autumn is as red as a fox. He trusts us, I am sure, but he has set himself to become as like us as possible, and that is a cast of mind I can feel with, for I was much like that myself when I was young.'

'I expect you are right, Beowulf,' said Hygelac, 'for you are a better judge of character than I am. You must not assume that I dislike the boy, or mean him any harm. Things have changed since Hathcyn's day.'

'Yes, they have changed. I hated my life then, when I was small and weak. I often wondered whether I should see daylight the next day, for Hathcyn did not like me.'

'Well,' said Hygelac, 'Hathcyn is no more, but you are still here. Yes, I think we are better than we were then. Hathcyn ruled through fear, and that is not a good thing. We will keep young Rorek safe. Not only is he the son of your wife, and the dear companion of my own son Hardred, but I can see in him a king of Denmark.'

'Once Rolf and Hereward are out of the way, he may be king,' Beowulf said; 'but that will be a long time, I think. Hereward is only a youngster, but he is dangerous. Rolf is older, and more dangerous. Yet he seems to have luck. Everything he does seems to bring him more fame.'

'That sort of luck does not go on for ever,' Hygelac replied. 'But if Rorek does become king, he will need vast treasures to assure the loyalty of his following, for he will have to scrape up men from all over Denmark. You are not a king, Beowulf, but I am, and I tell you this: a king keeps his men loyal by gifts and by good harping. The harper tells how great and generous the king is; and the king proves his bounty by doling out rings. Thus the duty of loyalty is assured. I would not talk to you like this, of course, if I did not feel that you were a son to me.'

'Nevertheless, it is true,' answered Beowulf. 'But it does not alter the case at all. If I may say so, you are a little cynical. Kings *are* generous and gracious; subjects *are* loyal; and there are few exceptions. In fact, I can only think of one king who did not behave like a king: Heremod, who used to kill his hearth-retainers at table when he was drunk. But he is always pointed out as an example of a bad king because nobody can think of another example. Furthermore, Heremod had a great lump at the back of his neck, just under his skull, and terrible pains in his head, so he may have had some excuse for behaving as he did.'

'You are getting off the point, Beowulf,' said Hygelac, smiling. 'We were talking of Rorek. What will he do for gold if he becomes king?'

'Oh, he will manage, I expect,' Beowulf replied airily. 'If at any time you decided we should make him king of Denmark, I myself would willingly forgo my share of the booty we should take – for we should have all Rolf's treasures, remember.'

So, having sown his seed, Beowulf waited for it to germinate in the mind of Hygelac. However, he had another reason for his seeming unconcern about where Rorek would get his gold.

Shortly after their marriage, Walthea was watching with Beowulf as his men worked on the new hall. In the carpenters' lean-to, the ground was thick with drifts of shavings from the adzes, and Walthea kicked her way through them like a young girl through autumn leaves. Then she turned to her husband with her eyes filled with tears, and moved close to him, tugging wordlessly at his arm. They ran hand in hand away from the houses and the half-finished hall, and into the trees.

Afterwards, they lay on the deep and scented mat of pine needles, their eyes closed, Beowulf hearing only his heart and Walthea's, the hum of insects in the summer air, and the sighing of branches like the sea. Then Walthea's lips moved by his ear, and at her words his eyes opened wide, and stared unseeing at the dark boughs overhead. When she had finished, he lay for a while without speaking.

'So Froda's gold is in England,' he said at length, slowly, 'with queen Truda in Northumbria; and no one knows but you and I!' And he laughed.

'Why do you laugh like that?'

'I was thinking of the queer way fate goes. Froda's ghost is long in being laid.'

'Fate goes where it will;
And, if it will
What I will,
You will
Hear tell
Of Froda's mill,'

said Walthea, and her husband started up on his elbow, gripping her shoulder so that she cried out.

'Your message! What witchcraft is this?' he demanded. 'Did you know what was going to happen, that Hroar would die, and - ?'

'Calm yourself, love,' said Walthea, now thoroughly scared. 'Of course not. You know I loved you as soon as I saw you, that first day in Staghall; I have told you so many times that my heart seemed to stop beating when you looked at me over the rim of that drinking-cup. And when I knew that you were to come back to Leire for Frea's wedding, I was happy because I thought we might steal our love for a time despite Hroar. Frea told me Ingeld's secret, and I wove it into my message because I thought it would intrigue you. I swear I had no other thought than that. Beowulf, my love, you do believe me?'

He looked at her intently for a moment, and then relaxed. 'Yes, I do. Forgive me. I don't know what I thought - that you had had some hand in plotting Ingeld's death, and hoped Hroar would be killed, I suppose. I am sorry. Froda's gold will bring no good to anyone. I almost wish you had never told me about it. But anyway, it is quite out of the question that I should go and seek it.'

'But why?'

'For one thing, Hygelac needs me here. Rolf might attack us, and so might Hereward, for that matter. I have been away long enough. I must wait on Hygelac's commands now.'

'Duty again!' said Walthea, mockingly. She added, hastily, as Beowulf frowned, 'No, do not be angry, lord. I understand. The treasure is best left where it is, perhaps, for the present at all events. And I certainly do not want to risk losing you to queen Truda, who men say is a witch-queen, or half an elf: I do not know quite what. She is said to be so lovely that all men are wax in her hands, and as cruel as she is beautiful.

Still, now you know where the treasure of Froda is, you shall decide yourself what to do about it.'

So Beowulf pondered the matter deeply, and came to the conclusion that Froda's hoard should stay where it was, unless there was great need of it. One eventuality in which the gold might be of use would be if Rorek became King of Denmark. But for the moment, Beowulf was quite content to work his lands, to ride and hunt with Hygelac, to feast in the king's hall, and to love Walthea.

*

During one of the many feasts, Beowulf was drinking with the king, and Rorek, who was fifteen, was allowed to sit between them. The six-year-old Hardred was sitting at the cross-bench on the dais, with the women and the other children. Beowulf drained his horn, and, placing it on its stand, said, 'That was wonderful ale! Rorek, get me some more.'

A servant was passing on his way to the barrels, which stood at the back of the hall, away from the fire, for it was summer. Rorek turned, grabbing at the servant's arm; and as he did so, his other elbow caught Hygelac's glass drinking bowl, his pride and joy, and knocked it to the floor, where it smashed into fragments.

Hygelac jumped to his feet, pale and furious, while Rorek sank to his knees abjectly, begging forgiveness.

The king stood silent for a moment as he mastered himself. Then, when he could trust himself to speak, his words were terrible.

'Rorek, Hroar's son,' he said, 'if any other had done what you have done, I should have severed his ribs from his spine and turned his lungs into wings on his shoulders. As it is, do not come near me again. You may keep to Beowulf's hall, but you enter this one again at your peril, and as far as I am concerned you have ceased to be. But if it is any comfort to you,

know that it may not be for long, because it seems to me that my doom is at hand.'

The women gasped as Hygelac spoke, and while Hygd was sobbing on account of the king's final words, Walthea was imploring him to soften his punishment of Rorek. But the king silenced everyone with an upraised hand.

'Stop this babbling, you women!' he commanded. Then he turned to Beowulf, and said, 'You go to the harbour under Whale's Ness, and tell Eofor that all my ships must be ready to sail in three days. Then get word to all my earls inland to fgather here before two days are out, with their retainers.'

'What is afoot?' asked Beowulf.

'Why, man, your step-whelp has broken my bowl, and I will have another if it costs me the Geat nation. We go to make war on the Franks!'

Beowulf flushed under the insult to Rorek, but could say nothing. He was in honour bound to obey Hygelac. Also, he knew that the king was not himself. He hurried off to the harbour.

*

Twenty Geat ships arrived off the mouth of the Rhine to win another glass bowl for Hygelac; and as they sailed up the river, West Frisians on the left bank sharpened their axes while they watched the ships row past. They sent messengers on horseback along the river bank; these soon outstripped the rowers and warned the chieftains of the more southerly tribes that a raiding party was on its way. So the West Frisians were alert and ready for the Geats if they should land. They also warned the Hetwara, Franks whose allies the West Frisians were, and the fierce Dayraven, king of the Hetwara, laughed at the Geats' folly. For Dayraven was a tributary king: the Merovingians were in power. Dayraven paid tribute to the great Theoderic himself, whose might could crush the Geats as a sledgehammer smashes a hazel nut. What was more, prince Theodebert, son of the Merovingian king, was only a few

days' march away, at the head of a great army. That was why Dayraven laughed, smacking his lips, and called for wine before arming himself and sending a herald to seek Theodebert. Then he kept his men from contact with the Geats.

The Geats passed the night aboard their boats and landed at dawn. Hygelac was forced to leave half his men behind to guard the vessels, and he marched inland with Eofor and Beowulf at the head of a mere two hundred and fifty warriors.

After a while, Eofor said, 'I do not like this at all.'

The countryside was deserted. They had not seen a single enemy soldier. In the afternoon they came to a township, defended by a handful of warriors, and sacked it, returning laden with booty in the evening to their ships.

On the following day, the Geats who had remained behind on the first expedition begged to be allowed to win treasures for themselves; and again the three leaders set out; again they met with little resistance; again Eofor grumbled.

He was justified. Dayraven's herald had by this time reached Theodebert, and the Merovingian prince was marching with twelve thousand men to the bank of the Rhine, while Dayraven and his Hetwara finally moved to intercept the Geats with five hundred - enough to prevent his own defeat, and to force the Geats to turn back against the Merovingian army. Dayraven was anxious to avoid heavy losses if he could: he did not see the point of paying tribute for Merovingian protection and then having to do most of the work himself. Even though Theodebert was only fifteen, Dayraven told himself, there were enough men with him to make the defeat of the Geats certain.

Having sacked and set fire to another small town of the West Frisians, just on the border of the Hetwara country, Hygelac was overjoyed to find a glass bowl among the loot.

'Here, Eofor,' he commanded, 'take this back quickly to the ships. I could not bear to press on any farther, knowing that I had it with me.'

Eofor took the bowl, with unhurried movements: now in his late middle age, he had become a lover of rustic life on his farms, and had come on the expedition with reluctance. He looked down from his captured horse, and said to Hygelac, 'I will do as you say, lord, but I think you have greater need of me here. Listen!'

From afar, the Geats heard the noise of the Hetwara army approaching from the south.

'Go!' ordered Hygelac.

'Farewell, lord Hygelac,' the other answered; 'and farewell to you, too, Beowulf. We have grown somewhat apart in latter years, I fear, for you have ranged much while I have sat at home. Wolf and raven will feast tonight, and if I were not a grown man, I think I would weep.'

'You talk like a man in his dotage,' Beowulf said with contempt. 'This is battle, and a man's blood stirs to it. Hroar said more openly what you are hinting at, and died. Go, take the king's bowl, and guard it well. You heard what the lord Hygelac said.'

'I heard, Beowulf King's Tongue,' said Eofor, looking sadly at his friend. 'I will take the bowl, never fear, and I will guard it with my life, for it will have been dearly bought.'

Then Eofor turned, kicking hard at the flank of his horse.

'Eofor is growing old before his time,' said Hygelac, and dismissed him from mind. There was no time for more comment after that, for the Hetwara were upon them.

That day Beowulf tasted for the first time the ecstasy of the berserker. As the Hetwara came near, he felt the blood-lust take him, and knew how close it was to love-lust. He threw away his sword, Hrunting, priceless weapon though it was, and seized a great axe; then, slicing, hammering and chopping, he abandoned his mind, which sank away from him in waves of warm blood.

*

He came to himself at the beginning of twilight, alone, the

evening breeze chilling the sweat on his forehead. He was lying on a little hillock, beside the dead body of Hygelac. All about him were strewn Geat corpses. Getting to his feet with a groan, because his head hurt, he took the king's sword from the guts that festooned it, the Hetwara having disembowelled Hygelac with his own weapon. Beowulf made to put Hygelac's blade in his sheath, for he remembered throwing away Hrunting. To his astonishment, he found a strange sword in the sheath. Holding Hygelac's weapon, then, he turned and made for the river, keeping the red streaks of the sunset at his back. He had gone no more than a hundred yards across the battlefield when a groan made him halt.

It was Olaf, the Danish coastguard who had come with Beowulf from Leire after the fall of Hroar. Beowulf knelt beside him. Olaf had lost a leg at the knee, and his face was as grey as a pigeon's feather. Yet he smiled when he saw Beowulf.

'You avenged your king,' he said to the Geat. 'Bear and wolf you were, like a fighter of the giant-race, the Eotens. I have never seen one man kill so many.'

'How did I avenge Hygelac?' Beowulf asked.

Olaf was silent for a long time, his head on Beowulf's hand. Beowulf thought the Dane was dead, but he roused at last, and said, 'The Hetwara king was Dayraven. He was a strong fighter. He killed Hygelac single-handed; and then you killed him. You took his sword.' Then Olaf's eyes dilated; the tendons of his neck stood out as he raised his head and tried to speak again; but death chuckled in his throat. Beowulf went on, to the river.

*

When he arrived at the bank of the Rhine, Beowulf saw the army of Theodebert a quarter of a mile downstream and a sorry remnant of the Geat fleet escaping seawards. In no berserker mood this time, but ice-cold, he went to meet them, one man against twelve thousand. On his way, he came upon

another body whose contorted face he knew. It was Eofor. Hewn by swords, he lay with open eyes staring at the darkening sky, and about his head the fragments of Hygelac's second glass bowl twinkled and glinted.

The sight brought Beowulf up short, and further, it destroyed the proud futility of the gesture he had been about to make. In the bad light, none of the enemy had seen him yet. He waited, crouched by the corpse of his friend, until camp fires began to glow from the Merovingian lines. Then he moved silently to the river bank. Dayraven's sword was ring-hilted, and Beowulf tied Hygelac's to it. Then he slipped into the water and let the fast current of river and running tide carry him downstream. Opposite the main body of the army, he made no attempt to swim, but rolled in the water like a dead man until he passed to the east of an island. When Theodebert heard of Hygelac's heroic fight, he commanded that the body of the king should be carried to that island and interred there, honouring Hygelac. As for Beowulf, he swam until he found a Geat ship wallowing at the river mouth with six living men and nineteen dead ones aboard. So they limped home, just able to work the ship with the help of steady south-westerly winds.

Beowulf gave Hygelac's sword to Hygd, saying, 'The bowl was broken, but Hygelac died well, and was avenged. Give this sword to your son.'

Hygd had been distraught when she had first heard of her husband's death, but she was now collected enough to answer, 'The sword should be yours, for I want you to take the throne. Hardred is too young.'

Beowulf laughed, and his laugh was not a pleasant thing to hear. 'I, a king? Lady, you do me too much honour. I have little right to my life, even though I did avenge Hygelac. I feel myself responsible for his death.'

'But this is nonsense,' Hygd protested.

'I remember the king's words when his bowl was broken:

"I will have another if it costs me the Geat nation," he said. But it was because of me that he was persuaded to set out with only twenty ships. If we had been in greater strength, perhaps - '

'The same thing would have happened, Beowulf. Theodebert's army would have been too much for the biggest force we could muster. I am only a woman, but even I can see that. Now, will you take the throne?'

Beowulf looked at Walthea, who was listening without saying anything, and then he suddenly shouted, 'No, by Odin! I will not. Let Hardred be king, for he is Hygelac's son, and the throne is his by right. Hardred shall be king, and I will stand behind him in everything he does.'

So it was. Hardred became king of the Geats in his seventh year; and, though Beowulf was king in all but name, he took great care to defer to Hardred in everything, for he considered in retrospect that he should have stayed and died with Hygelac. Even though the king had been avenged by the death of Day-raven, and duty had been done, Beowulf felt ashamed. And when Hygelac's scop, thinking to put heart into Beowulf, sang of how the hero had outwitted the Franks by his wonderful feat of swimming, cumbered as he was with thirty suits of Geat armour (according to the scop), Beowulf threw a bench at him, breaking his jaw, collar-bone, and right arm. Beowulf was as wise in counsel as ever, and he upheld justice and good rule among the Geats. Yet in himself he had become withdrawn and morose. Walthea once said to him, 'Your heart has turned to ice;' and it was with a shock that Beowulf realized that he was behaving as Hygelac often did. That puzzled him: had Hygelac himself cherished some secret grief? Beowulf never knew the answer to that question.

So the next two years passed slowly, and they were not happy ones for either Beowulf or Walthea. Only she knew how often, in the nights following his return, Beowulf had clung shaking to her and sobbing. He had not known mother-love,

and his early affections had all been given firstly to the aloof figure of Hygelac, and secondly to Eofor, who had taught him to be a boy, and to be strong. He had grown away from Eofor, simple fighting man and farmer; and he had never really known Hygelac. Beowulf believed that he had failed them both. So, though he was wise, he was cold; just, yet distant. He unbent only to his wife, and to the two boys, Hardred and Rorek, guiding the first, and moulding the second until he should be ready to take the throne of Denmark from Rolf. For Rolf was king, and Beowulf had decided to depose him.

2

Rolf sat on the Danish throne in Leire, smiling all the time, surrounded by his berserkers, and dispensing treasures so liberally to his retainers that he was known far and wide as the greatest ring-giver that had ever reigned in Denmark. Yet, though his lips smiled, his eyes remained the index of his character: proud and arrogant, watchful and predatory, they were like the eyes of a pike when, satiated, it allows small fishes to play within reach of its jaws without harming them. And when it grows hungry again, then the small fry are in danger.

Hereward soon found himself no match for Rolf. One day, soon after the Geats had escaped with Walthea and Rorek, Rolf came singing from the mews, where Habrok Ingeld's Bane lived, into the armoury where Hereward sat on a bench. The younger man was restless, and had ideas of making a raid that summer, so he was greasing a mailshirt with bear's fat to protect it from the corrosion of the sea. He had inherited neither his father's armour nor the throne to which he felt he should have succeeded; and despite the advice of the old spawwife, Unna, he could not wholly dissemble his feelings. He looked up sullenly at Rolf, who let the song die away into humming as he picked up a sword and made a show of

examining it, calling to the armourer to ask his opinion on whether it should be sharpened.

Soon, Rolf and the armourer were surrounded by weapons, comparing them and scrutinizing them; and it was not long before Hereward was drawn into the discussion willy-nilly. The talk soon became a monologue by Rolf on the relative merits of various swords. The armourer, if he had any opinions of his own, wisely kept them to himself, while Hereward's detestation of Rolf limited his answers to the briefest possible, consistent with keeping up appearances before the armourer. He need not have been concerned for that, however. Then, feeling he should say something for his own sword, Biter, he passed it to the armourer.

'Tell me,' he said, 'is that not the finest sword of them all - Froda's blade?'

The armourer took Biter, and scratched his head with his free hand, while he cast about for an answer which would satisfy Hereward without offending Rolf, who had been extolling his weapon. Rolf unbuckled his sword-belt, with sword in it, and passed it to Hereward.

'Hold this for a moment,' he said, 'and deny, if you can, that merely to hold it makes your hands itch for battle.'

Hereward held the sword-belt, thinking that it did indeed make his hands itch - to bury the blade in Rolf's belly - but he shrugged, saying nothing, and handing the belt back to Rolf.

Rolf smiled as he received it again, and remarked, 'You are very silent this morning, Hereward. I cannot think why, but I have often noticed that you seem ill at ease in my presence. Perhaps a feast would cheer you up. I have decided to call a great moot, at which all men must attend, after the harvest celebrations, instead of the usual moot, which men do not observe as punctiliously as I would wish. These are irreligious days, I fear. So if you wish to go over sea, hasten, and make sure you are back by the time the harvest is gathered. Then

we shall have a fine feast together, and all your difficulties will be resolved.'

Hereward did not know what to make of that speech, but he said nothing once more, so Rolf turned on his heel, still smiling, and left the armoury.

In the autumn, then, Hereward returned from a small raid on the coast of Britain, which he had undertaken with only fifty men. They had skulked along the coast until the summer was almost over, plundering and burning isolated farms and fishermen's huts, winning little honour but gradually accumulating enough booty to make the voyage worth while, and to assure Hereward that his little company would remain loyal to him. He kept hardly any spoils for himself, giving lavishly to his followers, and so they swore oaths of allegiance, and became his men. He felt stronger and more sure of himself when he went to Rolf's moot with a body of retainers at his back.

After the sacrifices and the hearing of suits, Rolf sat in the hall with his earls and berserkers. He called them to silence, and said, 'Before the feast begins, I myself have a suit to present to you, which it was not fitting to make known before people of the commoner sort. So I am content that it should be judged by you.'

There was a stir of interest.

Rolf continued, 'My suit concerns Hereward, son of Heregar. I am calling my armourer to testify on my behalf in this matter.'

Rolf spoke a word to one of his berserkers, who brought Hereward in front of the high seat. Then the armourer came, and was placed so that he confronted Hereward.

The company waited silently, wondering what was going to happen next. Rolf rose from his seat, and spoke to them formally, prefacing his remarks with a short boasting speech according to custom.

'I am Rolf, Halga's son,' he said, 'slayer of Froda, and of

his son Ingeld, lord of the Spear-Danes and Shield of my people. I think those here present will agree that I have not been stingy, but have behaved at all times in a manner worthy of a king. I am, I believe, a tolerant man, and it is not my habit to slight those who are faithful to me, but to reward them and protect them, giving them gold rings and mead against the day when I may require them to repay these gifts. All this is well and good.' He paused, looked round the tables and finally letting his gaze dwell on Hereward for a moment, before he went on, 'But in one thing I am stern. I uphold the old ways. This moot is the biggest that has been seen in this land for many a year, and great honour has been done to the gods. Say, have I done wrong in this?'

There was a great chorus of 'No!' from the company.

'I am glad that you approve. I have always said that men drift into slackness in religious observances because their kings do not set a proper example. I do not intend to be remiss as far as that goes. But the gods have given men rules to live by, which we call law. And I fully intend to see that the old laws are carried out, for if men neglect the laws, then they neglect their gods in doing so. Now who among you has the greatest skill in the old laws?'

There was some discussion, and at length an old earl was pushed to his feet. He said, 'I, Fitela, am said to have knowledge in the law.'

'Stand out then, Fitela,' ordered Rolf.

The old man joined Hereward and the armourer.

'Good,' said Rolf. 'Now we can proceed. I shall not keep you long from your ale.'

He then addressed the armourer, asking him, 'Do you remember a certain morning during the summer, when the lord Hereward was in the armoury, greasing his mailshirt with fat in preparation for a raiding voyage?'

'I do, lord,' the armourer answered.

'Tell us now exactly what took place, as you recall it.'

The armourer said, 'There is not a great deal to tell, lord. You came in and we talked about swords. The lord Hereward said that his sword, Biter, was the finest sword there was. You disagreed, and gave him your sword in its belt. I remember quite plainly what you said. You said, "Deny, if you can, that merely to hold it makes your hands itch for battle."''

'And what was the lord Hereward doing meanwhile?'

'Nothing. At least, he was just standing there, holding your sword.'

'And the sword was in the belt?'

'Yes.'

Rolf turned to Fitela. 'Now then, tell us the law. If a man holds another's sword in its belt, what takes place?'

Fitela quoted, "'He shall thenceforward be the vassal of another, who holds his sword while the blade is in its belt.'"

'That is the law?'

'That is the law,' said Fitela, firmly.

'Very well, Hereward, I must uphold the law, because it would not do for me to make exceptions for my kin: that would unfit me for the task I have set myself, to make religion and law significant again in Denmark. So, you become my vassal.'

Hereward was standing unable to speak, though he was trembling with rage.

'I will discuss the question of taxes with you later, Hereward. For the present, suffice it that your position in Denmark is clear.'

The younger man at last found his voice. He was about to curse Rolf, when he remembered old Unna's words. They had often prevented him from foolishness, and they saved his life on that occasion. So he swallowed his pride and said, 'My position is clear, as you say.' Apart from that, he kept silent, though, as before, his feelings were plain on his face. He turned

and left the hall, humiliated by the following laughter of Rolf's lords.

*

So the next two years passed slowly: for Rolf, who was busy consolidating his rule; and for Hereward. Rather than pay tribute to Rolf, Hereward had taken his fifty men into the northernmost part of Scania, where he took lands near the border with Geatland. The spaewife Unna accompanied him into exile. She advised him to send a messenger to the court of the Geats, which was how Beowulf learnt what had passed in Leire after his escape. Hereward's messenger returned, laden with gifts from Beowulf.

'Beowulf asked me to tell you to use this treasure in acquiring a better following. More will come, and he recommends that you lose no time, but set about suborning all Scania against Rolf. Stir up trouble anywhere you can, and it will be to your advantage.'

Beowulf forbore to add that the policy he had recommended would be to Rorek's greater advantage, also. His cunning soon bore fruit. Hereward's presence on the frontier gave the Geat a valuable means of obtaining news from Denmark. It was not long before he heard that many of the Scanian chiefs were rebelling against Rolf, and that the Danish king was planning a series of punitive expeditions to quell the unruly tribes. That suited his book well. He went himself to meet Hereward, who was feeling uncertain whether his policy of making trouble for Rolf was the right one, since he was not yet strong enough to oppose his cousin openly. He was afraid that Rolf might learn who was behind the apparently unconnected revolts; if that were to happen, he knew that Rolf would not rest until he had killed Hereward. Beowulf set his mind at rest.

'Never fear, Hereward,' said Beowulf. 'You will be quite safe. Send envoys to all the chiefs who are with you against Rolf. Let them kill a thrall or two, and dress the bodies in the garb of noblemen. When Rolf comes to their halls, they are

to exhibit the corpses, saying that they have put down a rebellion, and protesting loyalty to Rolf. Then they must tell Rolf that, while they have handled matters with promptness, other tribes farther north are still in a state of ferment. And if things become too hot for you in Denmark, then go raiding in Sweden until things have quietened down.'

Hereward chuckled, and said, 'I can see now why Rolf and Unferth tried to kill you, Beowulf, for you are a dangerous man to try to get the better of.'

'I have still a score or two to settle with Rolf,' the Geat answered. Then he went back to Geatland, to prepare for a great assault on Leire.

Fortune favoured him. The Franks were harrying the Danes in the south; Rolf was in Scania. Thus he had been compelled to split his forces, and had been able to leave only a token force as a garrison in Leire. Beowulf's fleet of ninety-seven ships encountered no opposition at all worth speaking of, and the Geat laughed as he watched Rorek's enthronement.

'You have done well for yourself at last, Rorek,' he congratulated the young king afterwards.

'What was done, you did,' Rorek said. He added, 'Beowulf, you will not leave me here alone?'

'I should think not! I will leave an army here to help you when I go. But I do not think you need fear Rolf now. His power is broken. And now you must call in as many earls as you can from the countryside, and buy their fealty.'

So Rorek sighed, and did as he was told. But he said to Beowulf, 'I do not really want to be king. I was happy enough in Geatland, both before Hygelac grew to hate me, and after his death. I do not relish my kingship, any more than my father did before me.'

'But a man should be glad to be a king,' said Beowulf.

'Then,' Rorek countered, 'why did you refuse the throne of Geatland when Hygd offered it to you?'

Beowulf refused to discuss that, saying that it was a different

matter altogether. Rorek looked at the older man with sad eyes, and sighed again. And the Danes knew that Rorek was no sort of a man compared with Rolf; so, while they accepted his gifts, they laughed at him behind his back, and waited till Rolf should return.

Rolf, by this time, was glowering across at Zealand from the Mound of Scania. He was furious at having been led all over the provinces by Beowulf's trick. But he mastered his rage, and camped where he was, biding his time until he saw the Geat ships sailing homewards again.

3

When Walthea learnt of Rorek's death the following year, her sorrow knew no bounds, and she became for a time like a mad woman. She would speak to no one, not even to her husband, but sat alone in a dark part of the hall, keening to herself in the language of the Celts, her long black hair unloosed about her face; and she slept apart from Beowulf. Then, one day, a wandering harper came to the court, and he sang of her son's death, simply but with great artistry, comparing Rorek to the roe-deer surrounded by the wolf pack in winter. When he described how, after keeping the fierce grey shapes at bay, its antlers dripping with their blood, the deer is finally overcome by weight of numbers, and falls, a shadow under a white moon, he made of the young king's death a tale of beauty rather than of ignominy. Walthea's emotion was released and spent itself in a gale of tears; and afterwards she was herself again.

Beowulf acknowledged that his first attempt at king-making had ended disastrously. Quite apart from his very deep affection for Rorek, he knew that he had acted wrongly in trying to seduce men from their loyalty to their lord, even if that lord was Rolf; and he had to admit that he had seriously underestimated the power of Rolf's personality, for the Dane had but to whistle, and the straying petty chiefs had come

like hounds to heel, or, to use the harper's simile, like wolves behind the leader of the pack. He resolved not to interfere again in the affairs of other nations, and he kept that resolution for six years, until forced to break it. The summers he spent raiding, mainly on the eastern coast of Britain, never risking all his forces in one great battle, but gradually building up the wealth of the Geats by innumerable small, simultaneous forays. To his own people he remained just and kindly, although stern; to others he became a figure of terror. And so time passed, and the grey hairs began to appear in his hair and beard.

*

Rolf sat once more on the Danish throne, and he smiled more broadly than ever. The thought that he was both Rorek's predecessor and his successor appealed greatly to his sense of humour. He had found little difficulty in deposing Rorek. Those chiefs whom Rolf suspected of disloyalty to him were punished by having their arms and legs smashed over a log, after which they were sent back to their tribes to squat by the hearth ashes and be fed by women for the rest of their days. After that, the other vacillating chiefs had quickly come back to his side. Rorek was brought bound before Rolf, his Geat bodyguard having been slaughtered in a swift and merciless attack by the Danes supposed loyal to Rorek. They set Rorek on the stone called the King's Seat, where kings were proclaimed, and mocked him, throwing filth at him.

'Well, my fine cockerel,' said Rolf, 'have you no greeting for your uncle?'

Rorek spat in Rolf's face, and Rolf's smile faded as the spittle ran down his cheek.

'You know how Ingeld died?' he asked. 'Unfortunately, Habrok has a hunger trace as a result of his late travels, and I cannot risk damage to his feathers till my austringer has impeded them properly in the mews here. So you are lucky, Rorek.'

And Rolf drew his sword, driving it upwards, under Rorek's chin and through the roof of his mouth into the brain. It was a good death, and a quick one, even though Rorek was entitled to decapitation.

'Farewell, nephew,' said Rolf as Rorek died. 'Speak well of me in Hel if you will, or speak badly. I do not intend to join you there for many a day.'

And then Rolf took the throne again, with his berserkers about him as before.

*

As Rolf grew in fame, and stories of his open-handedness circulated, so his following increased. One of the most famous of all the berserkers joined him at this time. This man's name was Bothvar. All sorts of strange tales were told about him. His father's name was Biorn, son of an old king who lived somewhere on the Uppland borders, towards the country of the Finns. After Biorn's mother died, the king married again, a Finnish woman having taken his fancy. When the old man went off on a war party, his queen suggested that it would be pleasant for her and Biorn if they slept under the same bed cover for the time being. Biorn was angry at this, and upbraided the woman. In any event, he was already deeply committed in love, having spent his nights for many months past with Bera, the daughter of a churl. The queen knew of this attachment, and she in turn was furious that Biorn should prefer a churl's daughter to a queen. Words got warmer and warmer between the queen and Biorn, until he lost his patience and clouted her on the side of the head, sending her reeling away from him. She got to her feet, and by the eerie light in her eyes Biorn saw that the Finnish woman was a witch. She tapped him with one of her wolfskin gloves and cursed him, saying.

'Biorn Skinturner, bear shall you be,
Bane of the cows of your father the king!'

and sure enough, Biorn became a were-bear, despite himself, destroying his father's cattle one by one. The queen told no one of what had passed between Biorn and herself and Biorn, as may well be imagined, also kept quiet about it. All that men knew was that a huge grey bear was responsible for the damage to the king's herds. In the end they lost the fear of the bear which afflicted them, and decided to hunt it down, as the old king pressed them to do on his return.

One night, Biorn was with Bera, and she said to him, 'We have had great joy together, you and I; and so I am glad to tell you that I have conceived, even though I doubt whether you will ever marry me, churl's daughter that I am.'

Then Biorn comforted her. He said, 'Bera, you are my only love, and I would willingly marry you, but I must die very soon. The queen cursed me, for she is a witch. She wanted me to sleep with her, but I refused on account of my love for you. So for you I became a were-bear, and it is I who have been killing the king's beasts.'

Bera wept to think that she was indirectly responsible for Biorn's plight, but once more he told her to calm herself, for a man could not escape his fate. One thing only he asked of her. 'If I am taken in the shape of a great grey bear, and killed, then go to the queen and demand that which is under the shoulder of the bear on the left side. The queen, if I know her, will try to make you eat some meat from the bear, but you must refuse.'

Biorn's mistress agreed, somewhat tearfully, hoping that what Biorn said would never happen. But he must have been fey, for the very next day he was killed: he had changed into the form of a bear, and soon afterwards a large company of hunters with many hounds gave chase to him. At length he turned on his pursuers, killing men and hounds before they slew him at last. Bera saw her lover die; and immediately she went to the queen, and said, 'Will you grant me as a boon that which is under the left shoulder of the bear?' The queen was

not at all disposed to accede to this request, but the king, who was by her side, overruled her, thinking that Bera wanted the heart of the animal. So Bera went up to the bear, weeping, and felt under the left shoulder, finding a ring there which she hid.

After the bear had been flayed and prepared for table, the queen, who had commanded that Bera should accompany the king's train to hall, offered her a steak of the meat, pretending not to know who she was. 'I have sharp eyes,' she said, 'and I can see that, whoever you may be, you are in the family way. So eat, and then your child will be strong.'

Bera refused the meat.

'Well!' said the queen. 'You are a proud little chit, to turn up your nose at a queen's hospitality! Now eat this meat, or I will have your child aborted. Come, bite!' and she forced Bera to take a bite out of the steak. Bera made a pretence of chewing it, trying to conceal her revulsion, but kept the meat in her mouth until she was able to make her escape. Yet when her son was born, he turned out to be much stronger than the ordinary run of mankind, so much so that he soon acquired the nickname of Little Bear, although his name was Bothvar. However all that might be, Bothvar Biarki was certainly very strong; and equally certainly, he was wearing a small, curiously wrought ring on his finger when he first turned up at Rolf's court in Leire, having, according to rumour, killed the wicked queen, taken over the small kingdom, and married off his mother to a man named Valsleet.

It was getting near to Yule when Bothvar walked into Rolf's hall. He sat down right at the bottom end of the table and looked about him with a bored and indifferent air. He was short and thick-set, with a chest almost as deep as it was broad, and sloping shoulders which tended to hide the great muscles which ran up to his neck.

The man next to him seemed a pitiful wretch. Bothvar introduced himself to this man, who said his name was Halti.

His face and arms were covered with bruises, and he was filthy. He stank of rotten meat.

'You look as though you have been having a bad time, my friend,' Bothvar remarked. 'Where do you live, in a midden?'

'Ssh!' hissed the other, trembling as he glanced up the board in the direction of the berserkers. 'They will hear you.'

Bothvar laughed. 'I am not disturbed about that,' he said, 'but I am curious to know how you got yourself into such a state. Come now, tell me all about it.'

Halti said that he had lost his battle-nerve, and had been relegated to the lowest position on the long table because he was a coward. Further, the berserkers made sport of him by throwing bones at him, which he did not dare to dodge for fear of being beaten to death.

'You are a miserable thing,' said Bothvar. 'I can see that I shall have to do something about you. But we will leave that for the moment. Now tell me, which is king Rolf?'

'The king is not at his table. He has built a castle, and often eats there with one or two chosen companions.'

'Well,' said Bothvar, 'I will see him later. For the present, I am thirsty.' And he hammered with a wooden trencher on the table, making a tremendous din and bellowing for ale.

The light was bad at that end of the hall; and one of Rolf's berserkers, who had not noticed Bothvar's entrance, yelled down the board, thinking that it was Halti who was making the noise.

'Be quiet, you gibbering sow's get!'

'And you be quiet, too, you foul-mouthed dung-eater and drinker of horse-piss,' Bothvar shouted back at him, not to be outdone, for he was always fond of invective.

'Be quiet, I say, or I will silence you for ever, you gutless worm,' screamed the berserker.

'Do not think you can tell me what to do,' Bothvar shouted, 'just because you have strangled a few babies while they were asleep.'

This insult was too much. The berserker snatched up the leg-bone of an ox, with the knuckle-bone still attached, and flung it with both hands down the table, at Halti, so he thought.

‘Look out!’ cried Halti.

Bothvar Biarki caught the bone, and sent it back again with such force that men heard it whistle through the air. It hit the berserker so hard a blow that his neck was broken, and he was killed. ‘Now bring me my ale,’ Bothvar said to a servant, who hurried to the barrel. ‘— And some for my friend here, too.’ Halti was overwhelmed with gratitude, for no one had been kind to him since he had become a coward.

‘I do not know what to say,’ Halti told Bothvar. ‘You do me too much honour, for I am a poor sort of wretch these days.’

‘It may be that you do yourself an injustice,’ said Bothvar. ‘But in any case I can help you. The ring on my finger gives me the strength of a bear. Take it and wear it — as a loan, mind, not as a gift — until your own courage and strength have returned to you. This will be granted to you on Yule Eve. Believe what I say, Halti, for although I am a rough sort of person, I am wise enough after my fashion.’

So Halti put the ring on his finger, and immediately felt a great access of strength, which he naturally attributed to the ring and not to Bothvar’s words. He wore the ring with great pride, but looked forward to Yule Eve, when he would have his own strength again, for he believed firmly in what Bothvar had told him.

Meanwhile, the other berserkers had given the news of their companion’s death to Rolf, where he sat in the strong wooden keep he had built for himself when he wanted to be private.

‘But was there no cause for this man’s death?’ Rolf asked.

‘Hardly any,’ said Vott.

But Rolf soon got at the truth of the matter. Now he was always ready to encourage old customs; but he made an exception over that of throwing bones about the hall, for he held

that a man should be able to eat at the king's board in peace and without fear.

'This hurling of bones at unoffending men must cease,' he said, 'for it slights my own honour, and I think you have behaved shamefully. However, bring this man to me quickly, so that I may see him for myself.'

When Bothvar was told that Rolf wanted to speak with him, he said, 'That is what I have been waiting for. Come, Halti.'

Halti was afraid, and did not relish the idea of appearing before Rolf, but Bothvar said, 'Come with me to the well.'

So they went to the great well in the courtyard, and Bothvar said, 'Strip off your rags, Halti.'

Halti obeyed, and Bothvar saw that the other was a strong man, well-muscled and hard. He called to a couple of thralls to pour water over Halti, while Bothvar himself rubbed his new-found friend down. Then Bothvar got new clothes for Halti from Rolf's under-chamberlain. After that, they walked up to the keep.

Bothvar saw Rolf sitting in his chair by the fire, dressed for peace in a loose coat and breeches. He greeted the king with courtesy.

'And what is your name?' Rolf asked.

'Your men call me Halti's Friend, but my name is Bothvar, and I am also called Biarki.'

'I am told that you have killed one of my men.'

'I killed a creature who was throwing bones in your hall, lord Rolf. Whether he was a man or not, I did not find out: he died too easily for that. At all events, he was less of a man than Halti here.'

'And how do you make that out?' the king inquired, looking at Halti, who hung his head.

'Why, because my friend has endured the throwing of countless bones without taking offence, for fear of disgracing your table with blood spilt among your followers; but one bone killed this other.'

Rolf laughed. 'That was well said, Bothvar. You seem to be a man of spirit. But what are you going to offer me in the way of man-price for him you have killed?'

Bothvar pretended to ponder deeply. Eventually, he said, 'This is what I think, lord. I am not going to offer you gold, for I intend that that shall come from you to me. I came to this country to make my fortune, not to give it away. But I have noticed that Danish women are very pretty; and if you will wait seventeen or eighteen years, you will find by the end of that time that I have replaced the man I killed with a hundred fine young warriors - all taking after me. Alternatively, I will fill his place in your retinue as best I can.'

Rolf said, 'Then you will be my man; and, as for the other suggestion of yours, why, time will tell.'

'One thing more,' Bothvar Biarki said.

'What?'

'I will not part from my friend Halti. We must both have a higher place at table than was occupied by the man I slew. Otherwise we will go elsewhere to seek our fortunes.'

Rolf raised his eyebrows, while Halti trembled. At last, Rolf agreed.

'Very well. I cannot see that Halti will ever do anything, since he is a coward, but I cannot let him starve or be persecuted, so I might as well have him under my eye.'

So Bothvar Biarki and Halti joined the company of Rolf's berserkers. Rolf dined more frequently in hall after that episode, for he realized that he had been in danger of slackening his hold on his retainers by his continual absences. But after the arrival of Bothvar and Halti, the tone of Rolf's company began to change for the better, until no one could have recognized in them the ill-favoured band of earlier days. Rolf, therefore, attended with better grace because of that.

*

Vott and Starolf, who were in their middle-age now, and past

he was in a good mood; besides, there was a strange and instant affection between him and the newcomer.

He took a ring from his arm. 'You are a spirited young fledgling,' he said. 'Take this, and see if it can tell you anything.'

The stripling placed the thick ring on his own arm. Then he raised it to his ear. 'All it says is that it is lonely, and would like a companion.'

While all the others marvelled at the fellow's audacity, Rolf still remained calm, passing over another ring. The young man's blue eyes smiled happily at him.

'Rolf Kraki, that was well done, and royally. My name is Vikk, and I have come to be your man.'

'Then you shall serve me,' the king pronounced. 'You may be young, but that is something that time will cure. And what is more, to commemorate this occasion, any man from now on may call me Rolf Kraki without fear of my displeasure.'

Vikk said, 'Because you have honoured me, I will swear an oath before all these men. I swear that if ever you should fall in battle, then I will avenge you.'

Some of the other retainers, including Bothvar, smiled to think that an unblooded lad should talk of taking it on himself to avenge the greatest king in the world, as they thought Rolf; but Vikk was to keep that promise in the end.

4

'Rolf becomes more famous every day,' Beowulf said to his wife. 'Everything he touches prospers. When I think of the splendours of the Danish court as it was when I knew it - and it must be even more splendid now - I cannot help feeling envious. I made a terrible mistake when I left your son in Denmark, for if I had stayed with him, you and I and Rorek would have been living in luxury, Rorek would have been still

alive, and I am sure I could have killed Rolf, so we should have had no need to fear him.'

Walthea said, 'We have been over this time and again. Rorek is dead. That was his destiny; and, though I blamed you at first, I do so no longer. The Geats may not be such a great nation as the Danes, but at least you have made them greater than they were when Hygelac ruled, and they were under the Danish thumb. So be content.'

'But what shall I say to Rolf's herald? I am sure he is going to sue for peace between us.'

'Kill him, and send his head back to Rolf.'

'He will offer a great deal of gold to pay for Rorek's death, and for the death of my men who died in Leire. I am tempted to accept his overtures. - No,' he restrained Walthea, who made an angry movement, 'I could never feel real friendship for Rolf. I detest him. But as it is, all contact between our nations is cut off, and that is a bad thing. An enemy is even more dangerous when you have no means of knowing his intentions. Further, we cannot raid either the Franks or the Frisians, nor can we pass through into the Baltic, because Rolf's ships are too many. I think we must take what he offers.'

'Well, I am a woman, and a Celt. I think that this custom of paying for men's lives with gold is uncivilized. Only blood can pay for blood.'

'Very well,' said Beowulf. 'I expect I shall take your advice, and kill the herald. It is a dishonourable thing to do; but I have little enough honour left. At least that will start an open war between Danes and Geats, and then the issue will be decided one way or the other.'

*

While Beowulf was keeping the herald kicking his heels, an excited Geat came into the hall and reported that a party of men dressed for war was approaching from inland. Beowulf told Hardred not to be afraid, and then went to the door of the

hall, thinking that it might be Hereward, from whom he had had no news for two years. When he saw by the amount of gold on the leaders' trappings that they were Swedes, however, he shouted to them to stay where they were.

'Have no fear,' shouted one of the leaders. 'We come in peace, and as suppliants to the great Beowulf.'

'Two of you come forward without weapons, then,' ordered Beowulf, calling to a man behind him for an axe.

The two men in the forefront dismounted, handing their reins and their arms to their companions, and came readily towards Beowulf. They were both short and swarthy, each with the same thick lips, and ears that stood out from their heads.

'I am Athils, and this is my brother Anmund,' said one of them. 'We are the sons of king Ottar of the Swedes.'

'Well,' said Beowulf, 'the gods know that I have small cause to love Swedes, for Angantir, your grandfather, killed my king, Hathcyn, when I was young. And I think that you two, similarly, will remember the battle of Ravenswood, though you could not have been there. But if you believe that Angantir's death paid for Hathcyn's, as I do, then you may enter the hall with your men, and say what you have to say. You must leave all weapons outside, though.'

Athils said, 'We have told you that we come as suppliants, and we are not in any position to dictate terms to you, Beowulf. We have no desire to avenge Angantir's death on you: this I swear. And we will willingly leave our weapons outside your hall, and throw ourselves on your protection.'

Beowulf was most surprised: he had thought that the Swedes would at least have insisted on retaining their swords.

'Come then, and be welcome, and all your men with you,' he said. 'King Hardred will receive you.'

The presentations were made, and the boy king welcomed the fugitives. At seventeen, he was mature beyond his years,

and quite able to receive important visitors without any prompting from Beowulf on how to behave.

'Now, Anmund and Athils,' said Hardred after the formalities were over, while Hygd and Walthea brought ale, and serving men gave meat to the travellers, 'tell us what brings you to my country, and rest assured that you will have a fair hearing in Geatland.'

Anmund said, 'Kind young king, greatness shines in your eyes, and I give thanks to the gods for the day that sent us to Geatland rather than to Denmark. We are rebels against our uncle Onela, and we and our men have barely escaped from him with our lives. But you have such a noble and merciful air that you will hardly refuse us sanctuary in your court until such time as we can drive our uncle to his death.'

Beowulf said, 'All this is interesting, but what will happen, do you think, when Onela finds that you have come here? And anyway, we did not know that Ottar's brother was king instead of Ottar.'

'Of course,' said Hardred, 'how is it that Onela reigns instead of your father?'

'Ottar died last year,' Athils told him. 'Onela took the throne, and he behaves like a wild beast. He intends to make war against the world, come what may.'

Anmund added, 'He is helped in this by Yrsa, who came to Sweden when Angantir died.'

'Say nothing against Yrsa,' Athils warned his brother.

Anmund said, 'My apologies, brother,' and explained to the Geats: 'Athils has a soft spot for the woman, though I detest her myself.'

'Yrsa!' exclaimed Walthea. 'She is Rolf's mother.'

'And his sister, too,' Beowulf reminded her. 'Froda's ghost still walks; and it behoves men to tread warily.'

'We will not quarrel about Yrsa,' said Anmund, 'but let us come back to the most important point: will you Geats give us refuge, and help us against Onela?'

Beowulf whispered to Hardred, and the king said, 'You are most welcome to stay here for the present, and we will make our decision known as soon as we reach it. So drink, and enjoy yourselves!'

*

As soon as he could, Beowulf conferred privately with Hardred.

'Lord, we must act carefully,' he said to the king.

'What do you advise?'

'My wife thinks we should kill Rolf's herald, and I had thought to recommend to you that we should do this, distasteful though it would be, in order to force Rolf into open war. Yet now I think his hand would be more use with us than against us; and if the herald offers friendship, we should accept it. Athils and his brother have claimed sanctuary, and we have given it them. Now do you think Onela will sit back in Sweden while the brothers raise an army against him?'

'Hardly, I suppose,' said the king.

'You are right. We can expect an attack from Onela as soon as he learns where his nephews are, for he cannot sit easy on the throne until they are dead. And Danish help would enable us to withstand the Swedes. Lord, let us see this Danish envoy, and find out what Rolf is offering to compose the differences between the Danes and ourselves. Then, if the terms are fair, we will ask also that Rolf should send aid to us against the Swedes. By all accounts, Rolf has some very good men in his service, men whom I would rather have as allies than as enemies.'

'I agree,' said Hardred. 'Call in the herald.'

Rolf's envoy promised gold equal to eight thousand head of cattle. With some difficulty, he was persuaded to increase this sum to the equivalent of ten thousand, and to urge Rolf either to send an army sworn to help the Geats, or to bring one himself, whichever was the more convenient.

In four months, the herald was back again, with the gold, but without the army. The gold was very welcome, for

Hardred's coffers were feeling the strain of supporting the Swedish brothers and their following.

'But where are the Danish warriors we asked for?' the king inquired.

The herald made a deprecatory gesture. 'Lord, I am to tell you from Rolf that a Geat must urge the Geat case in this matter. He requests that Beowulf should accompany me to Leire, alone and without weapons, as a warrant that the Geats trust him. For, he says, lack of trust between us has led to much unpleasantness in the past. If Beowulf will come to Leire on these conditions, to explain much that needs explanation, then no harm will come to him, and great good may ensue. Otherwise, the issue must be regarded as settled by the gold. I do not want to press the point, but this great sum is surely a plain indication of my king's intentions towards the Geats? You have accepted the gold, and in doing so have waived the right to vengeance for Rorek and your men. That is quite in order, and things need go no further. So, before lending any considerable military aid to the Geats, king Rolf wants something more, to show that he is trusted.'

When they were alone, Hardred tried to dissuade Beowulf from going to Denmark with the envoy.

'Well,' said Beowulf, 'we are between the hammer and the anvil. I cannot see that my going will make things any worse, and it may conceivably make them better. So I think I ought to go. I cannot be dishonoured by doing this, certainly.'

Hardred was reluctant to give his assent, but he gave it in the end. With Walthea, it was altogether different. She raged and stormed at her husband.

'Be quiet,' he commanded her at length, 'or you will make me glad to go to Leire, if only for a little peace.'

'Peace!' she said. 'My first husband wanted peace, and you know what happened to him.'

'I know: you are wilfully misunderstanding me. War will soon rage through the world, and I am glad of it. But I had

rather be on the winning side, and if an alliance with Rolf will bring this about, then we must have that alliance. And I am afraid it will have to be on his terms.'

'You have changed much since Hroar died,' Walthea said.

'I was a fool, and we will say no more of that, nor of Rolf. My mind is made up.'

'Well, if Rolf comes here, don't expect me to speak to him.' Then Walthea broke down, sobbing, 'If only that were all I have to fear! My greatest fear is that I may never see you again, my love.'

'Hush now, and wipe your eyes. I shall be quite safe, you will see.'

He was nevertheless unable to allay her fears.

*

Returning from Leire in Rolf's ship, Beowulf reflected that his mission had gone as well as he had hoped: Rolf had been courteous and friendly, giving it out that, now he had settled the Geat claims with gold, and now that Beowulf had shown that he trusted the Danes, they would be pleased to help by fighting against the Swedes. If Rolf knew anything of Beowulf's past dealings with Hereward, he gave no sign, and thus the only thing that might have caused trouble to break out afresh was avoided. Rolf had no news of Hereward's whereabouts, except for an unsubstantiated rumour that he had sailed to Finland. Rolf did not fear anything that Hereward could do, however, and so he brought five hundred of his best men north with him to Beowulf's aid.

'I can see the struggle for succession among the Swedes going on for a long time,' Rolf said to Beowulf. 'If Onela is killed or deposed, will the brothers Anmund and Athils not turn against each other?'

'That is possible,' Beowulf admitted. 'And I do not much care if they do, as long as they are off Geat soil at the time. I must say that I prefer Anmund to Athils, though. He and

Hardred became fast friends at once. And I must tell you that Athils takes every opportunity of defending your – of defending Yrsa. If I may say so, the lady Yrsa seems destined to cause strife.'

'Do not think you embarrass me by talking about Yrsa,' Rolf said. 'I am used to it; though I have still barely recovered from the shock of knowing that she had turned up at the Swedish court. She must be an old woman by now. I wonder if she still hates me?'

'You may see her if all goes well.'

'Yes: it might be amusing, now that I am old enough to hold my own with her. I have never understood why she turned against me. Am I to blame because my father kept a sword where other people keep a dagger?'

Beowulf suddenly sniffed. 'I smell smoke!'

In three hours they were off Whale's Ness, looking up aghast at the billowing reek that came from behind the promontory. The ships were hastily beached, and Beowulf seized one of the men who came running to meet them, his face black with grime and his eyes wild.

'Lord,' the man babbled. 'The king! The Swedes attacked, and –'

'The Swedes? Athils and Anmund? Has there been treachery?'

'No, no, lord. A great army from the north.'

'Onela?'

The man nodded. 'Lord, we had no chance. We fought as best we could, and the Swedish brothers fought like devils. But the enemy reached the hall. They killed the king, and Anmund, and – lord, lord, they –' The man faltered. 'The women, lord –'

Beowulf flung the man aside, and raced up the cliff path to the wreckage of Hardred's town, leaving the others to follow. They found him standing by the body of Walthea. His face was white, and a muscle twitched in it, and his eyes were

closed. When he opened them, they were quite dry, but the look in them made men catch their breath and draw closer to each other.

Bothvar Biarki said to Halti, 'This smoke gets in a man's eyes,' and he blew his nose apologetically with his fingers.

'Be still, you clown,' said Vikk.

Athils said to Rolf, 'You took your time getting here. If you had been a day earlier, this need not have happened.'

'Be silent, you clod,' said Rolf, delivering an insult which Athils never forgot.

At length, Beowulf spoke. 'Give me the tally of the dead,' he said.

One of the Geats said, 'Lord, the Swedes only left at dawn, after a day's fighting and a night of pillage. We hardly know as yet who is dead and who still lives. But besides those whom you have seen, Hygd and Swan were slain.'

'You Geats who have fought so well shall be rewarded,' said Beowulf; 'and your men also, Athils, though the price of giving you sanctuary has been hard indeed. It will need many Swedes to pay for these dead. Now bring us horses. I will hammer Onela into the ground.'

Rolf stayed him. 'Lord Beowulf, if you give chase now, you will not make your vengeance sure. Everyone is tired. If you will be guided by me, you will wait until you can be certain of crushing Onela when you strike.'

'I waited for your help, and was too late.'

Athils said, 'I think Rolf is right. I would go farther. Let us wait until winter: Onela will not expect an attack then until spring. There is much to do here, besides. The dead must be buried, the place must be set to rights: and you must take the throne.'

'I?'

'Of course. Hardred is dead. Who else is to be king, if not yourself?'

Beowulf stared past the still smouldering buildings, gazing

at the sea. He remembered a small weakling child, throwing a crab into the waves, and saying, 'One day I shall be king over all these people.' There was no choice now: he had to take the throne at a time when he would rather have done almost anything else. He looked back again, at Walthea's body. 'Very well, then, I will be king,' he said.

5

Vikk came into the hall, stamping the snow from his sealskins and blowing. The winter boards were up over the windows, and Vikk shut out the bright flash of daylight which had tried to enter with him. He took a bowl over to the ale barrel standing by the fire, swigging the warm brew down. The frozen crystals which bejewelled his clothing softened and ran; then he was steaming like a horse.

He went over to the others.

'Well?' said Beowulf.

'Men say that inland the wolves from the north moved south in such numbers that one could not see the snow on the ground.'

'Wolves coming south, eh?' Halti muttered. 'I hope there is no omen in that.'

'The wolves always move southward in a hard winter, wooden-head. This winter is harder than anyone can remember, and there are more wolves, that is all.' Rolf was sceptical.

Athils said, 'We sit here like old women. I have a brother to avenge, king Rolf; and king Beowulf here has business in the north also. Let us ride.'

'I agree, with all respect,' Bothvar put in. 'Sword-swinging will warm me the better to drink my ale after it.'

Beowulf spoke, his hands clenched on the board before him. 'How soon can we be ready?' His face in the faint light was stern, his hair white before time.

'That is for you to say,' Rolf reminded him. 'My men will be glad of some exercise. And do not think that we will fight any the worse for its being winter.'

Beowulf made a half-hearted gesture to disclaim that he had any such thought. Rolf stood up, stretching his lanky body and confronting the Geat. Timber wolf and bear, said Athils to himself as he watched them.

Rolf said, 'Before we ride together, there are certain things that must be made plain. Firstly, I swear to you that I hold nothing against you for having tried to put Rorek on my throne. You believed the boy had a prior claim, and you had to uphold it because he was kin to you by marriage. I have asked for no gold to pay for my own men killed over that affair, but I have requited your losses generously. Mind you, I do not think we can remain friends for ever, you and I, but I will stand firmly with you and Athils against Onela.'

Beowulf said, 'Thank you for these assurances, Rolf. I accept them gladly. No man could fail to be honoured by having you at his side. As to our remaining friends for ever, or no, I remember Hroar said we were oil and water. But it is better for a man to wait and see what fate will bring.'

'We ride, then?' asked Athils.

And Beowulf answered, 'We ride.'

*

When Onela heard that Athils, with the Danes and the Geats, was marching to make war on him, he laughed grimly, for he had a great opinion of himself. He was as well-built as Angantir had been, but without Angantir's powers of endurance. He, also, affected a silver helmet, with inter-twined animal forms worked on it. Like all the Swedish royal line, he was a great lover of horses, and his favourite mount was called Raven, since it swooped into the fields of battle like Odin's bird. On Raven, then, Onela rode at the head of his army to meet his enemies.

The Gota Elf river, which joins Lake Vener to the sea, was frozen hard and deep in that severe winter. Beowulf and his allies rode up the river, using it as a highway, though the ice was anything but smooth. They had to pick their way through a jumble of piled floes; and, even on the comparatively flat stretches, the surface of the ice was rutted and scarred, so that the going was treacherous for horses. Still, it was better than floundering in the drifts of the countryside.

Beowulf wondered why no one had suggested to Hathcyn that he should sail up the Gota Elf, portaging at the Trollhattan Falls, and into Lake Vener to make his attack on Angantir. He remembered the long, cruel march to the battle of Ravenswood, when he himself had been a young and almost untried warrior. Yet then he had been surrounded by friends, and now he was almost alone. Wulf, Eofor, Hygelac – all were gone, together with Rorek, Hardred, and Walthea. At the thought of her, his mind left battle for a while, and he recalled two smoke-blue eyes seen over the rim of a gold cup. . . .

The horse stumbled, and Beowulf was brought up short in his reverie. But as he rode he tried to sing a plaintive little song that Walthea had been fond of. The words were Celtic, and Beowulf could not bring them to mind properly, though he had heard them a hundred times and knew what they meant, for he had asked Walthea.

One of Rolf's retainers, riding nearby, suddenly began to sing in a high, pleasing voice. It was Walthea's song.

'Mistletoe, Mistletoe, round my thigh
cling,' said Oak, 'and drink me dry.'
'I drink deep,' said Mistletoe bine,
'and yours is the sap I sup like wine.'
And Mistletoe twined to the old Oak's head
till she kissed and kissed while the old Oak bled
and he whispered, 'For love I am dead, am dead.'

'Thank you for finishing my song for me,' said Beowulf.
'It is a good song,' the stranger said, 'and you were

tormenting it most unfairly. Where did you learn it, may I ask?’

‘You may not, for the present. I am king Beowulf of the Geats.’

‘Pardon me, lord. I did not recognize you. My place in your hospitable hall was a low one.’

‘Who are you? Are you a Celt?’

‘Kei is my name, and I am a nephew of queen Truda of Northumbria. My mother, unfortunately, was only a concubine.’

‘Truda of Northumbria!’ Beowulf exclaimed, remembering what Walthea had said about the beautiful and evil queen. ‘I hope we shall have an opportunity to talk together at leisure, you and I. I have much to ask you about queen Truda.’

‘Those who know her are given to wishing that they lived a thousand miles away from her,’ said Kei, ruefully. ‘As I know to my cost, for she tried to have me killed when I would not serve her in bed. I ran away, and, hearing there was a Celtic queen in Denmark, sailed to Leire. I found no queen on the Danish throne, but Rolf instead, and I took service with him.’

That evening the army camped on the ice of the lake. The weaker horses were slaughtered, and soon the meat was roasting over huge fires on the ice. Beowulf went round in search of Kei, but could not find him in the dark, and at length rejoined the other commanders. Athils was drunk and snoring already. Rolf was merely fuddled.

‘That one takes more than his fair share of ale,’ Rolf said, prodding the mound of bearskins under which lay Athils. ‘He is a pig. Still, he is not yet king of Sweden. I hate the king of Sweden, and will kill him. Then, if this thing becomes king of Sweden, I will kill him too. I cannot bear kings of Sweden.’

‘I wonder how the battle will go?’ Beowulf wondered, more to himself than to Rolf.

‘Who knows?’ said Rolf, icicles of ale round his lips, on

his fair beard. 'Sickness, old age, an arrow at night, battle - death comes, one way or the other, and no man can escape it. Do no disrespect to the gods, and let things take their course, that is all that a man can do.'

'Unless you come closer to the fire, you will freeze.' Beowulf finished a great mouthful of yellow horse-fat, a fine protection against the cold, and called for hot ale. Then he asked Rolf, 'Are you sure Athils knows the plan of attack?'

Rolf laughed. 'He knew it two hours ago, but whether he will remember it in the morning is more than I can say.' He spat at Athils's bearskins, and moved over to the fire by the Geat.

*

As soon as dawn came, the invaders moved to the attack. Beowulf and his Geats took the centre, advancing head-on towards the Swedes. Athils's company rode out on the right flank, keeping level with the Geats, but far enough away from them to force Onela to split his warriors in order to meet his nephew's onslaught. Rolf went north, and wheeled east when he and his army were almost out of sight in the mist that was beginning to rise as the sun touched the ice. Then, Onela had to meet threats from three separate points. He decided to attack the Geats, but as he spurred forward, flourishing a single-edged sword and yelling, his earls behind him faltered as Athils's archers sent a stream of arrows at them, followed by spears as soon as they were within range. Three or four score turned to face Athils, who refused to meet them hand-to-hand at first, drawing them away from the main combat and then riding in suddenly to butcher them. Athils, on a grey horse, was seen to fall, and Beowulf watched anxiously until he satisfied himself that Athils was unscathed, though the horse had been killed by a spear.

Athils thrust upwards into the belly of a Swedish earl from Onela's army, hacked at the man as he toppled from his horse, and then was mounted again and encouraging his men with

loud shouts to show that he was unharmed. Then the Geats met the Swedes.

Beowulf was astonished at the ferocity of Onela's men. The memory of Ravenswood had faded a little with the years, but he realized that the Swedes were as tough and bold as ever. He and his men would have been cut to pieces without the help of Athils and Rolf, for the Swedes were their equals in combat, and were superior in numbers. But Onela could not bring his full force to bear on the Geats. Onela was harassed by Athils's worrying at the flank, and Rolf by this time was in the Swedish rear, cutting through the lesser warriors there and rolling the Swedish formation up on itself. Beowulf fought grimly and coldly, taking no berserker risks, but killing with calm efficiency, picking his victims and working ever nearer to Onela. Athils began to bore in from the side, and it became a race between him and Beowulf to reach Onela first. Athils had a brother to avenge and a throne to win; Beowulf had to exact payment for the death of his king and that of his wife.

Blood-spattered and raging, Onela bestrode the great black horse and rode at Beowulf. Raven was well-trained in war: he caught Beowulf's horse at the shoulder with his own, almost crushing Beowulf's leg. Beowulf parried Onela's back-handed blow at his left ribs; the sword slid off the bronze boss of his shield, passing through a crack where the linden boards were pinned together. A quick twist, and the Swedish king's sword was out of his hand. Beowulf raised his own for the kill, and in the same instant Onela reared his horse. Raven struck with his hoofs at the head of Beowulf's mount, and it stumbled sideways, falling while Onela howled with triumph and drew his sax.

Beowulf saw only Onela's hand and arm above him, with the shining sax at the limit of its upward stroke. Then there was a flash; the hand was falling, with the sax in it – but not down into Beowulf's throat. Onela was staring at the stump of his arm as a blued steel sword hit the crupper of Beowulf's

saddle on the down-stroke, and Kei's white teeth gleamed in his swarthy face as he drew back the sword for the thrust. In the same instant, Athils's axe shore into Onela's neck, biting deep into the chest. Onela fell from Raven, and Athils seized the bridle, leaning over to bite the horse's ear before slipping over from his own mount on to Raven's back.

'The horse is mine,' said Athils, glaring at Beowulf and Kei.

'Take it, and welcome,' Beowulf said. 'That is a good horse. But I am not sure that I needed the help of either of you.'

'I think you would have been dead without it,' said Kei.

'I am not disposed to squabble about it,' Beowulf told him; 'and for all I know, you may be right. In any case, Kei, you are a man of mettle, and I will see that it does not go unacknowledged. I am not one to steal battle honours. You are both men with whom I am proud to share them.'

Athils, who had been scowling at Beowulf and Kei, was pleased by this, as was the Celt, so the incident passed off harmlessly. After all, as Athils said, neither he nor Beowulf could claim full credit for Onela's death; but, equally certainly, both of them shared in it, and so each could account the blood between them and Onela avenged.

Rolf now rode up with his berserkers, blood up to their armpits and bespattering their mailshirts and horses. 'It is over, I see,' he said, looking down at Onela's body. 'There will be much booty. You and I must discuss when I am to collect my share, Athils, according to your promise.'

'That can wait,' said Athils, shortly. 'I must ride swiftly to Uppsala to take my throne. Then I will send for you. The ordinary battlefield booty will be shared tomorrow.'

'Oh, you will send for me, will you?' said Rolf. 'Very well.' And Beowulf, who knew Rolf, saw that he was in a dangerous mood.

Bothvar was saying to Halti, 'Did you hear that? The lord Rolf is to go to Athils when the little man flaps his ears! What do you think of that?'

Luckily, Athils had not heard what Bothvar was saying, for Beowulf took Kei by the arm and brought him to where Athils and Rolf were standing.

'Rolf,' he said, 'this man had a hand in Onela's death, and I think he and I will be friends. If he consents to serve me, will you release him from his oath to you? I will see that you do not suffer any loss if you agree to this.'

Rolf turned away from Athils, who immediately rode off, shouting over his shoulder to Rolf, 'Come to Uppsala in the spring, then, and you shall be paid.'

'Kei,' said Rolf, 'are you happy about this? Would you like to serve the lord Beowulf?'

'I should be pleased to do so.'

'Very well, then, I release you from your bond to me.'

'So that is settled,' Beowulf said happily, as he and Kei went to look over the battlefield for Geat dead. 'Your place in my hall will be higher than it was last time, that much is certain.'

*

After the booty of the battlefield had been shared out, Beowulf exchanged gifts with his fellow commanders, and also rewarded his men, Kei among them. Then the surviving earls of Onela's army were led one by one to the execution log. One of these men looked up as he knelt before the log, and said, 'Wait! Before I die, I have a claim to make on my kin.'

'What are you talking about?' Rolf asked him. 'Get your chin on that log, and stop maundering.'

The man said, 'I am Vesten of the Waymundings, kin to the lord Beowulf, and I wish to place a family duty on him, as is my right.'

Beowulf said, 'It is sad to see you in this case, kinsman. What can I do for you?'

'Two things. Find my sword; it belonged to Anmund, whom I killed. Then find my little son, Vilaf, and take him under your protection.'

'Tell me one thing,' said Beowulf. 'Had you any hand in the death of my wife?'

'None. That was Onela's doing.'

'I will undertake what you ask, then,' the Geat said.

He made a sign to the axe-man, and watched with an impassive face as Vesten's head rolled over the log to his feet.

6

In early spring messengers came to Beowulf from Rolf, saying that he was on his way to Uppsala to claim his dues from king Athils. Rolf sent rings as a token of his continuing friendship towards the Geats and asked for safe-conduct through Geat territory. Remembering his promise to Vesten, Beowulf sent Kei with the messengers, enjoining him to travel with Rolf's company as far as the Vendel country, to seek out Vesten's son, Vilaf, and to bring him back to the Geat court. Beowulf knew of Rolf's fondness for gold, and thought ruefully to himself that he should have exacted a similar promise from Athils before helping him against Onela; but he knew in his heart that he had assisted Athils for revenge and to avoid dishonour rather than for gold.

Kei did not return till summer; but he brought Vilaf with him, a small, frightened boy with tousled hair, riding a moth-eaten old pony.

'Come, lad, do not be afraid,' Beowulf said gently. 'I promised your father that I would look after you, and so it shall be. When you are old enough for arms, you shall have Vesten's sword, which belonged in its time to Anmund, who was a prince.'

'He is shy,' Kei said, 'but he is a fine boy, for all that, and modesty becomes a youngster who has not received arms. When he is a man, he will do all the boasting you Geats could require, I expect, so leave him to me for the meantime, and I will see that he is looked after.'

The boy said nothing, but Beowulf looked closer and saw that despite his fear, Vilaf was sizing Beowulf up. Vilaf had clear blue eyes set widely apart, and a mouth which was on the large side. He did not fidget, but sat steadily on his pony, waiting.

'We are poorly off for royal womenfolk here in Geatland, Vilaf, as Kei may have told you,' Beowulf went on; 'but you will live well, if roughly.'

'Yes,' said Vilaf, and got down from the pony, keeping his hand in its shaggy mane.

'What is the pony's name?'

'Lord, he is called Swallow.'

Beowulf grinned at the incongruous name. 'Well, Swallow needs feeding up. Come, we will take him to my own stables. He shall be treated as a king's horse.'

Then Vilaf smiled, and he went with Beowulf. From that moment the Geat had won him over, and he was to remain loyal until the day of his king's death, and beyond it.

*

From Kei, Beowulf learnt the story of Rolf's visit to Athils.

Rolf had ridden from Leire with a hundred men, and had taken the route through the country of the Geats, keeping to their territory as long as he could, for he could not trust Athils not to have him ambushed on the way. So he passed between the two great lakes, riding through Ravenswood. There he sacrificed to Odin before continuing his journey.

Late the same evening, the travellers came to a farm set in a little hollow. The farmer, a tall man with a hat shading his eyes, called to them from outside the farmhouse, and asked them if they wanted refreshment.

Rolf laughed, and said, 'I am king Rolf of the Danes, and I have a hundred men with me. What sort of hospitality could a farmer in a small way offer?'

'I am a farmer, certainly,' the man protested, 'but in a larger way than you think, perhaps. I beg you to accept what I have to entertain you.'

Rolf thought it would be a good joke if things went as he foresaw, and so he said, 'Very well. But I swear by Odin that if one of my men remains unsatisfied after you have fed us, I will chop off your head.'

'I am only a farmer, and so cannot swear by Odin. But I swear by Nertha Earth-Mother that all your men shall be fed, even if all my beasts have to be slain to do it.'

That was just what Rolf wanted to happen, so he gave his men permission to dismount and enter the farmer's hall. They squeezed in and began clamouring for drink, emptying barrel after barrel of ale as they waited for their meat. The farmer did not seem at all put out by the way the warriors were swilling his ale, but simply sat and smiled. He had given Rolf the best seat opposite to his own, and Rolf suddenly noticed that the farmer had only one eye.

'You have lost an eye,' he said in surprise. 'How did that happen?'

'An accident.'

'Not in battle?'

'No. As I have said, I am only a farmer.'

'Well, I suppose you honour Odin in your way. That is a good thing.'

'Yes,' said the farmer. 'Here comes the meat.'

And to Rolf's astonishment, there was enough meat and to spare at the farmer's table; even Bothvar, who had the greatest appetite of all, was full at the end of the feast.

'What is your name?' Rolf asked the farmer.

'Rani.'

'Well, Rani,' Rolf said, rather grumpily, 'you have fed us all, and fed us well, there is no gainsaying that, so your head will remain on its shoulders.'

'Thank you.'

And then Rolf laughed. 'But I do not expect you will have many cattle left after this night's entertainment, nor much ale.'

'Do not worry about me, lord,' said Rani. 'A great king need not concern himself with people of my sort. I will manage, I expect.'

That night the whole company slept in the hall. During the night it became colder and colder. Man after man awoke shivering and cursing. They covered themselves with anything they could lay hold of, fighting and shouting until they finally settled down again. Only Rolf and his twelve berserkers were unaffected.

In the morning Rani said to Rolf, who had told him where the company was bound, 'I should send home half your men, if I were you. I know it was a little cold in the night, but a man who cannot put up with cold at need is not a man, and it will be a waste of time having such people with you. You will not get the better of king Athils by numbers: a hundred men are sometimes of less worth than fifty.'

'You are right,' said Rolf, 'and you seem to have some sense.'

So he called his men together and picked fifty of them, telling them to return at once to Leire. As soon as they had gone, a fierce storm arose.

'That must have been the reason for the intense cold of the night, lord,' Vikk said. 'My teeth were chattering, I will admit. I can bear heat better than cold.'

'So can I,' said Halti.

Bothvar said that it was all one to him, heat or cold. 'At least there is twice as much room in this hall now, and only half as much stink, which is a good thing, for I do not expect we shall continue our journey today.'

Rolf agreed that it would serve no useful purpose to set out that day. He looked at Rani with some amusement.

'I am sorry we shall have to ask your hospitality for another night, farmer,' he said.

'Do not disturb yourself on my account, king Rolf. We shall feast again this evening, and you will be entertained as before.'

And so it was. Rolf looked at Rani in amazement.

'How many beasts have you?' he asked.

'Enough, I think.'

Then Rani had fires lighted for his guests, saying that he did not want them to suffer cold again. Soon many of the men began to feel the heat, and moved away from the fire, but Rani continued to have fuel piled on until only Rolf and his twelve berserkers were left sitting with Rani, the sweat streaming down their shoulders.

'Lord Rolf,' said Rani, 'there are only twelve men worthy to go with you to king Athils. The others will simply be a nuisance.'

'You are right once more, farmer: my twelve champions only shall accompany me.'

And Rolf sent all his men home except for the chosen twelve. So it was a small party which eventually rode up to Athils's court at Uppsala.

*

Rolf and his men caused considerable amazement among the common people, for they had seldom seen the like of these warriors, and crowded up on the walls of the town to get a good view. Rolf acknowledged their plaudits courteously, but he said to Halti, who was riding by his side, 'I have a feeling that Athils will greet us rather differently from this.'

Bothvar suggested that Rolf should ask the advice of three brothers in his band. They were Svipdag, Beigath, and Vitserk, and were acquainted with Athils and his ways.

Beigath said, 'Ride slowly till we are within sight of the king's hall; then let us spur swiftly to the door and go in as quickly as we can.'

'I agree,' said Vitserk. 'And when we are in the hall, let us

group ourselves about the king, so that Athils cannot see for a moment which is Rolf.'

Svipdag said nothing, but loosened his sword in its scabbard, and nodded. So then the Danish party clattered up to Athils's hall and demanded to be allowed to enter. Bothvar was given the task of looking to the horses, and he told a Swedish groom to see that they were well fed and watered, after which they were to be groomed and given good stalls. Then he joined the others and they made their way into the hall, keeping close about Rolf.

Athils sat under the pillars of the high seat, proud and haughty, and with a sneer on his face.

'Welcome, king Rolf,' he shouted down the hall, 'and welcome to your great army! Are you not afraid to come here with such a tiny company? Indeed, I think you do me small honour in coming to see me like this.'

Rolf spoke, standing suddenly from the midst of his champions: 'King Athils, I have come to collect the dues you owe me.'

Athils chuckled. 'You shall have your dues, never fear, king Rolf. But are you not afraid of what they may be? I remember a day when you called me a clod. Well, some people might call you the same for visiting me thus.'

'I will flee from neither fire nor steel,' Rolf boasted.

He and the berserkers began to move up the hall, when Vikk whispered, 'Lord, there are men concealed behind the tapestries. Look!'

Vikk was right. Rolf murmured a few words, and the men spread out on each side of the hall, thrusting their swords into the hangings as they went towards Athils. Each of the warriors who had been hiding there was killed.

Then there was a commotion, but Athils pretended to be horrified, and shouted for silence.

'What is all this?' he cried. 'King Rolf, I greatly regret this unfortunate incident. Who these men can be I have no

idea. Some ruffians, doubtless, who for some reason were evilly disposed towards you. Well, well, I am very sorry. Come now, and sit together.'

Still very suspicious, with some justice, the Danes ranged themselves with their backs to the wall, facing the fire.

Athils said, 'It is rather cold for spring. Men, bring more wood and light some more fires. King Rolf and his men must be chilly: they look rather pale.'

Bothvar said loudly, 'You flap-eared bastard,' but Athils pretended not to hear him. He wanted to have his fun with the Danes. So men brought wood, staggering under the loads of faggots, which were followed by logs. Soon, the fires became terribly hot, and the king of the Swedes moved away from the fire, together with his men.

Vikk said to Halti, 'My marrow will melt soon.'

Halti replied, 'I am in just the same case.'

Then Bothvar, overhearing them, told them, 'Do not complain. I remember you both said in Rani's house that you liked heat better than cold. Here is all the heat you need. Come, shield the king!'

And Bothvar moved in front of Rolf, taking the full blaze of the fire, so that his clothes began to smoulder and he groaned despite himself. A serving man drew ale from a barrel, taking pity on Bothvar, and, pretending to slip, spilt a huge horn of it on to the fire in Bothvar's place; but the fire was so fierce it made little difference.

Then Svipdag said, 'This fire burns low, King Athils. Let me help to brighten it a little.' And he rushed to the side, picking up one of the men who was piling wood on the fire at Athils's orders. Svipdag tossed the man into the middle of the fire. Bothvar roared with laughter, and grabbed the other fire-keeper, treating him similarly. There was a great stink and sizzling then, and all the Danes guffawed while Athils's brow grew thunderous.

At last Rolf said, 'I swore to flee neither fire nor steel. If

been one of those killed by the visitors as he hid behind the arras.

'King Athils says that we must not kill any of the Danes' horses,' he told the under-grooms; 'so dock their tails and shave them.'

This was done, and the horses' toppings were shaven roughly off. They looked a sorry sight, more like mules than horses.

*

Athils went to collect as many of his men as would face the berserkers, which was not very many, a few score only, in fact. But when at last they broke into the hall, there was not a Dane to be seen; and Athils cursed, for he knew that they had discovered his secret bolt-hole. He rushed to the treasury, to find the best part of his treasure gone; then to the stables, to find his most precious horses likewise taken, and all the other horses killed save for the wretched animals which the Danes had left.

Athils paused only to rip a dagger into the throat of his groom, and then jumped on a Danish horse, calling to the others to follow. There was no rush to do so, but eleven men mounted at length and spurred after the king.

Rolf and his berserkers, meanwhile, were riding south as fast as they could, laughing and joking among themselves. Their plan had succeeded magnificently. Yrsa had been as good as her word, and Rolf had promised her sanctuary in Denmark if she should need it. That seemed very likely, though she refused to accompany them, saying that her presence would only encumber them.

As they parted, Yrsa said to Rolf, 'Keep plenty of gold handy in a saddle-bag slung on your pommel. He who sows gold timely may harvest his life.'

And Rolf kissed her, saying, 'You have been a good mother to me, and I will remember it.'

*

On the Fyris plain, as luck would have it, Rolf's horse cast a shoe, and the party was delayed till they found a smith and forced him at sword-point to shoe the horse.

The smith finished his work and said, 'That is Raven, king Athils's horse. But whatever work you have been up to, I will not spoil the best horse in the world by botching my job. That shoe is a good one. Still, I hope your guts shrivel in your belly as you ride.'

Rolf said, 'That is the sort of talk I like to hear. You are a brave man, smith. I am sorry I cannot stay to talk with you now, for I hear other horses approaching; but this is for your trouble.'

He gave the smith a gold piece with the head and inscription of an old eastern king, Basiliscus, on it. The smith spat and threw it into the forge fire.

'So much for that, then,' said Rolf. 'Come, away!'

They had to ride hard, for Athils and his followers were close behind. Rolf knew that sooner or later there would be some outpost or other where Athils would be able to command fresh horses and reinforcements, so he took the gold from his saddle-bag and let it fall piece by piece as he rode, until the bag was empty.

The lure was too much for the Swedes. One after the other they dismounted and scrabbled in the dirt for the gold, until only Athils still rode. Even he succumbed in the end, for there before him he caught sight of a great ring called Sviagris, which was priceless and particularly esteemed by him. This ring was Froda's. Ingeld gave it to Hroar; after Hroar's death Hereward took it, and, on his way north, gave it to Onela: so it passed to Athils. He picked at it from his horse with a spear, but could not manage to retrieve it, and he had to get down and take up the ring from the ground with his hands, which was great dishonour to him. So Athils let his lust for gold rob him of his vengeance. Froda's ring brought Athils little luck. The Danes, though they were weighed down heavily with the

rest of the treasure, escaped out of sight and then turned west.

They rode hard past the northern tip of Lake Vetter, until Bothvar said, 'Let us make for Rani's farm. He will shelter us and let us rest our horses.'

So they continued until they came to the spot where the farmer Rani lived. They thumped on the door, and Rani opened it. He greeted them when he recognized them.

'You lack proper armour, king Rolf,' Rani said; and it was true, for Rolf's shield had been lost in Athils's fire, and his garments were sadly scorched and blackened. Rani went into the farm-hall, and returned with a spear, a shield and a dirty leather jerkin, which he offered to Rolf.

Rolf looked with disgust at these things, and refused to accept them.

Rani became annoyed, and told them that they could not spend the night at his farm. Then he slipped inside, and the Danes heard the sound of heavy bars falling across the door.

'Come,' said Rolf, 'we will waste no more time here.'

Rani called through the door to them, telling Rolf that he thought the least Rolf could have done was to have shown a little honour to his host by accepting the gifts, and that now the Danes might go where they pleased. 'Furthermore, Rolf,' he concluded, 'you have had much help from me in the past, but you shall have no more of any sort.'

So they left Rani's farm, and rode towards Geatland. A mile or so from the farm, a thought struck Bothvar, and he said, 'Lord, I left my knife outside that farm. Will you give me permission to seek it? I will soon overtake you again.'

Rolf assented, so Bothvar turned and rode back in his tracks till he came to where the farm should have been. But the farm had vanished, and Rani with it; and Bothvar knew then that the one-eyed man had been Odin himself. He was grim when he rejoined Rolf and the others to tell them what had happened. They said that he was lying, and returned themselves to find that he had spoken the truth.

Rolf was pale as he turned to Vikk and said, 'I swore on many occasions that I would never do disrespect to the gods, and yet I have slighted Odin. I fear that things will go ill with me after this.'

Halti told Rolf that whatever happened they would stay true to him, and Rolf answered, 'I know this, and it is as it should be. But have you no fear of standing by me when Odin All-Father is against me?'

'Not I,' said Bothvar, stoutly, and the other berserks similarly.

Then Rolf told them, 'I am honoured indeed to have such retainers, though I feel a great sadness come upon me now, for I seem to see my doom ahead sooner than I had expected it.'

'Do not be too downcast,' Vikk advised the king. 'Fate rules the paths a man takes, and not Odin. Avoid battle from henceforth as far as you can, and things may yet be well, for Odin is the god of battle and has no say in other affairs.'

This was generally agreed to be good counsel, for Rolf had honour enough from a life of glorious deeds, and could sit back and let others fight for him, unless someone were to attempt the throne, in which case he would be bound to defend it personally, at the head of his warriors.

Yet evil tidings came to Rolf almost at once. Geat messengers intercepted the small party and announced that the friendship between Beowulf and Rolf was at an end. The two groups of men whom Rolf had sent back from Rani's farm had behaved disgracefully in Geat territory, stealing stock, raping women and girl-children and murdering their menfolk. Beowulf held Rolf responsible for these outrages, as was just, and promised him that if he showed his face again in Geatland after once having left it, he would be a dead man.

7

Kei and Vilaf sat at ease in a spring field of kingcups, while Kei told the story of the birds of Rhiannon. When he had finished, Vilaf let out a long sigh, for the sad tale had moved him.

‘Do your warriors go to a place of war and feasting after death, Kei? Like ours, I mean?’

‘They go to Afalon, the apple-land, where it is always summer, and each day is like the first bite into a fragrant apple.’

‘I am not sure that would suit me,’ Vilaf said; ‘and I am sure it would not suit king Beowulf. Kei, why is it that he is so kind to us, and so fierce and harsh to all others except Geats?’

‘That is the way of the world, boy,’ said Kei, as he capped his nose with a kingcup and stared at it cross-eyed with his head tilted back. ‘Your grown-ups would say that it is because we are his men, and that would be true, up to a point. The rest of the world howls like a wolf outside the door, for any king, and not only for Beowulf. But he is a lonely man, I think; and that makes him cling closely to his own while he fights implacably against all who may try to take from him what he has. He has little peace of mind, though. Who knows – perhaps he seeks no Valhalla, but an Afalon? I should like him to see my country.’

*

When Hereward decided to claim his birthright, and so put an end to his years as a sea-king and a rover in the northlands, he came riding into Geatland with a very large following. Besides the many new recruits, the skulking retainers of Hereward’s earlier years were now hardened veterans, seasoned by grim campaigns in the far north, news from which seldom reached the Geats. Hereward, too, had a new air of command:

presumably even Athils had noticed it, for he had allowed Hereward to pass unmolested through Swedish territory. Long ago, old Unna the spaewife had told Hereward that he would be king of the Danes, and Hereward himself plainly thought that the time had come. Beowulf could think of another reason for Athils's having let Hereward through without attempting to make him pay either in gold or in lives: Athils knew that Hereward and Rolf were enemies, and it would suit his purpose very well if the two were to come to grips.

Beowulf called a feast in his hall, and the scop sang sweetly to the harp. When he had finished, Beowulf commanded silence and then stood up.

'Hereward, prince of the Shield-Danes,' he said, 'it is a long time since I have had such a company of warriors to entertain in my hall. It is my wish that all should eat and drink heartily tonight. And let there be no unseemly quarrels. If any man wishes to fight, then he must go outside to do it, and not profane my board. And now I have a thing to do. When king Hroar, best of men, was killed by his grief in Staghall as it burned about him, I took Heregar's arms and armour for my lord Hygelac, as Hroar commanded me. I remember that you, prince Hereward, were displeased by this, for these things were your father's. None the less, my duty was then plain: I was Hygelac's man, and so I obeyed Hroar's wishes and brought the gear to Hygelac. Now Hygelac is dead, and I have the right to dispose of the arms and armour as I please.'

Beowulf made a sign, and his armourer strode down the length of the hall bearing Heregar's war-trappings. There was a perfectly conical helmet of iron, inlaid with silver, with a nose-guard and cheek-pieces. The armourer gave this to Beowulf, who handed it to Hereward. Next he passed on the mailshirt, which had silver wire cunningly interwoven among the mesh of iron rings, and four great garnets across the breast. Then there was a plain linden shield, bronze-bossed and bound with iron, scarred and chipped in many places by

sword-strokes. This also he gave to Hereward. Finally he handed over Heregar's sword. It was a Frankish blade of blued steel, and damascened: the pattern of wave-forms could still be faintly discerned. That sword was a product of the great period of smithing, when the Celts set up their forges in Frankish country and made blades of tempered steel in return for trade concessions.

'These things are now yours, lord Hereward,' Beowulf said. 'Use them well. The sword is called Nailing.'

Hereward spoke, and his voice shook with the strength of his feeling.

'Beowulf, king of the Sea-Geats,' he said, 'I never looked for such a moment as this when I came to Geatland after a hard journey from the north. Truly, a man might say that you are the greatest king of all, strong, yet gracious and great-souled. Whatever I may have felt about you in the past, I say before all this company that I am now your friend. And in token of this, you must accept this sword.'

There was a murmur of surprise. Beowulf said, 'But the sword is beyond all price. Besides, it belonged to your father.'

Hereward smiled gently. 'Lord Beowulf, that is why I should like you to take it. It is worthy of such a man as you. And I already have a sword, which pleases me well enough.' He patted his scabbard.

Beowulf said, 'Your sword is Biter, Froda's blade. Did you change the inscription, as I advised?'

'No. The sword is good enough as it is. Come now, take my father's blade.'

'Well, lord Hereward,' said Beowulf, 'your gift does me great honour, and I would be a churl to refuse. But for all that, I do not like to see you with Froda's sword at your side. That is one weapon which I think would be better hanging on the wall of some treasury.'

'When I am king, I may adopt your suggestion. For the present, however, I shall continue to wear Biter.'

Then Beowulf gave rings to each of Hereward's earls. He had been moved, as Hereward had hoped he would be, by the gift of Heregar's sword. Consequently he agreed to help Hereward in his attempt on Rolf's throne. He would not accompany Hereward himself to Denmark, but gave permission to any of his men who felt inclined to join Hereward's army on the chance of enriching themselves and winning high honour in battle. He smiled grimly when Hereward's mixed company sailed south in Geat ships which Beowulf had lent to Hereward.

*

Rolf's policy of not engaging personally in combat, nor of doing anything in which Odin might be tempted to intervene, was not as successful as he had hoped it would be. The Danes were used to having the greatest, bravest, most open-handed king in the world - namely, Rolf - and they were quick to note that Rolf fell short in the days which followed his return from the court of Athils. None of the berserkers gave away Rolf's secret, and so his encounter with Odin remained unknown to his followers. Yet his reputation began to decline. First of all, the hundred warriors who had been sent home on the journey to Sweden felt disgraced and ashamed. Although they had relieved their feelings to some extent by murder, looting, and raping in Geatland on the way home, they still felt aggrieved at having been robbed (as they saw it) of a share in Athils's treasure, and at Rolf's lack of trust in them. All of them grumbled to their friends in Leire; and some of them even said openly that they no longer considered themselves bound to Rolf. Secondly, Rolf was no longer as generous as formerly; and he had become given to fits of moody silence during which it was as much as a man's life was worth to speak to him.

Halti had a mistress whose father was a farmer. His farm overlooked the Roskilde firth. After a night of lovemaking,

Halti rolled from under the sleeping-covers and looked outside. Then he returned to the woman, and woke her.

'Wake up, woman, for this is my death-day,' he said. 'You can hardly see the water of the firth, so thick are the ships on it.'

Halti's mistress sat up. She was a coarse, heavy-breasted young wench, broad-bottomed and highly apt for men, but with small capacity for true love.

'So you are going to die, Halti?' she said, scratching her belly. 'What shall I do for a man when you are gone?'

'Get married,' said Halti, tensely, as he dressed and armed himself.

'But whom shall I marry?'

'Would you rather have two young lads of twenty-two, or one old one of eighty?'

The woman stood up. 'Look at me. What use would an old man of eighty be to me? Give me the two young 'uns every time!'

'Come here, then, and let me whisper something,' Halti said, with one hand on the latch of the door.

The woman approached closely, expecting some farewell endearment. But Halti seized her by the hair above her ears, and then bit off the end of her nose.

Through her screams, Halti said to her, 'That should teach you not to question a man about his successors at a time like this. I doubt now whether anyone will be much interested in you, even an old man of eighty. But try one if you can find one. You will be lucky if there are even any eighty-year-olds left after today.'

And with that, Halti rode as fast as he could to Leire, to warn Rolf of the invasion. Rolf was sitting with the rest of his champions about him, listening to his harper. The notes faltered and ceased as Halti spoke.

At length Rolf got up. 'Bring me my armour and my sword Skofnung,' he said, and Halti hurried off. 'A man must defend

his throne, but this day will go ill for all who stand by me. Odin's hand is against me, as you know.'

Now these were the men, besides Halti the Magnanimous, who went with Rolf to Athils, and who were with him that day in Leire: Vikk, Bothvar Biarki, Svipdag, Beigath, Vitserk the Swift, Harr the Strong-Handed, Vott, Starolf the Old, Thori Houndsfoot, Haki, and Haklang. They all said that they were with Rolf, and they won fame by their deaths.

Bothvar shook his shield, and said, 'My ghost met a raven with a bloody beak, a gigantic bird, and asked it, "Where are you flying, old crow?" And the bird said, "I am off to my master, Odin, to tell him that there has been great slaughter, and that he and his Einherjar should make places ready in Valhalla for a great crowd." "Then give me a lift on your back, my croaker. I want to get into Valhalla, to spit into Odin's one eye."'

And Bothvar laughed at the amazed faces of his companions, and said, 'Come, Odin is against us whatever we do. For my part, if I meet Odin face to face on the battlefield, I shall have a swing at him with my sword.'

Even Rolf took heart at Bothvar's words, and he said, 'That was well spoken, my friend.' And the others swore that they were ready to repay to Rolf the mead and rings that he had given them, so he told them to assemble all who could bear weapons. This they did, and then they loaded their arms with gold, so that they might strike the more heavily.

Fighting was already in progress in the fields between Roskilde and Leire, and there was little time to lose, but Rolf made a short speech of exhortation to the warriors. Then they rode to meet Hereward, and the real battle began.

From the first, things went badly for Rolf. Matters were made worse by treason on the part of some of his disgruntled followers, those whom he had sent back from Sweden. These included the champions defeated by Bothvar and Halti at the Yule Eve feast. They had a double load of spite, and had

forgotten all honour. They attacked the rear, setting many buildings afire. The twelve who were faithful to Rolf remained wholly steadfast and unafraid. But Hereward's army, with nothing to lose but their lives, and everything to gain, fought like wolves, slowly beating Rolf's men back into Leire among the burning buildings. Leire brook ran red that day.

At last, Rolf was forced to retreat into his hall, which had escaped the fire. There, among the wreckage of his beautiful feasting-benches, he made his last stand. Haki and Haklang were dead by then, and Vott and Starolf, the oldest of his berserkers; so were Beigath and Thori. Svipdag and Vitserk avenged the slayers of Beigath. Then they, too, fell, and there was none of their kin to exact payment. Vikk reeled unconscious from a blow on the temple, rolling under a bench, and his still body was soon covered with corpses. Then Rolf and Hereward came face to face.

'At last we meet again,' said Hereward. 'I have waited a long time for this moment.'

Rolf looked at his kinsman with a sad smile, and then dropped his sword-point and his shield, suddenly overcome with a great weariness of body and soul. He sighed and slid to the ground as Biter found his heart, Hereward having stabbed crosswise into the armhole of Rolf's mailshirt. Rolf looked up at Hereward and tried to say something, but got no further than the word 'Odin,' after which a great gush of blood came from his mouth, and he died.

The great press of invaders paused a moment, looking at Harr and Bothvar, who were the only survivors of Rolf's champions. Hereward said to them, 'You two men have won great honour today. Will you now accept quarter if we give it? It will be no dishonour to you, for your king is dead.'

'Did you hear anything, Little Bear?' Harr asked Bothvar.

Bothvar slipped his shield further up his arm, and pretended to listen, hand cupped to ear. 'I tell you what it is, Harr. It's

that stinking old black pig we once used to keep in the sties behind the hall. He always used to grunt like that at mealtimes, and now I expect he thinks he's going to eat at the king's board.'

Harr roared with laughter, and the two men ran forward at Hereward, but they were too greatly outnumbered. Harr lost both his hands and died without a weapon in his grasp. As for Bothvar, he killed fourteen men before he was overwhelmed. It is not certain who killed him; at least six of Hereward's followers claimed some part in his death. So all was over, or almost over.

Hereward and his men marvelled at the spirit of Rolf's berserkers. Yet they knew that there had been twelve of them, and only ten were accounted for. A search revealed Halti's body at the edge of the town: he had killed many of the attackers before being cut down.

'Well,' said Hereward, 'that leaves only one. That one is doubtless lying dead also. I am sorry, for I could have used such men. Now, I will take the throne at once.'

So Hereward was proclaimed at the King's Seat, and he returned immediately to the hall, tired, but vastly pleased with himself. Unna the spawife had been right, and now he was king! Another strange thing happened on the way back to the hall. The lesser sort among his retainers were going through the Danish women with a will, and screams arose on every side. From one dwelling burst a naked girl, with fine golden hair falling to her buttocks. She was pursued by two drunken warriors, who were hooting with laughter. The girl was about fourteen or fifteen, slim and pert-breasted. Hereward felt his loins moved with desire for her; and, marvelling, spoke a word to those who were with him. They banged the two men hard and sent them stumbling away, then brought the girl before Hereward. She blushed and fidgeted, shifting from one foot to the other and trying modestly to cover herself with her hair.

Hereward's desire increased, and with it his wonderment. He had not tried to make love to a woman since the day, long before, when he had drunk Unna's potion, nor had he felt any desire. Now his lips were drained of their colour, his voice was shaky, and he trembled with lust.

'Who are you?' he asked, trying to keep his voice under control.

'Lord, my name is Signy,' said the girl, her eyes downcast.

'Signy, this night you share a king's bed,' said Hereward. Then he ordered rich clothes to be brought for her, and led her into the hall at his side.

*

A makeshift meal was prepared on the spot, before even an attempt had been made to clear the hall of the corpses and the debris which littered it. Hereward drained a long horn of ale and belched expansively.

'Truly, this has been a hard day's work, but a profitable one,' he said. 'Nor will any of those who fought for me today have any cause to regret it. For the present, however, we will content ourselves by drinking deep, and then - ' he looked at Signy ' - we will retire early, and clear up this mess in the morning. Only one thing troubles me.'

'What is that, lord?' asked one of the earls.

'A small matter, I suppose. I have never seen fighters like those twelve men of Rolf's. They asked for no quarter, and I think that a great pity, for I would have welcomed their service. And now not one of them is left alive.'

'You are wrong there,' came a weak voice, and men caught their breath with astonishment as Vikk crawled from under his broken bench, pushing dead men aside as he did so. Vikk had been lying senseless for almost six hours, and had only come to his wits again during Hereward's last speech.

'Stop!' Hereward shouted to the men who ran to kill Vikk. 'Bring that man here.'

Vikk said as he stood before Hereward, swaying, 'Give me something to drink. My mouth always tastes foul after I have been asleep.'

Then even the men who had been about to kill him laughed at his audacity, and one of them ran forward unbidden by the king, giving Vikk a cup of ale, which he drank quickly.

'Well,' Hereward said, 'you are the last of Rolf's men.'

'That does not surprise me,' Vikk told him. 'I was the weakest of the lot. But perhaps I still have some use left in me.'

'You are too bashful,' Hereward said. 'Come, I could use a man of your mettle. Will you serve me?'

Vikk paused for a moment, then said, 'Lord, I will indeed,' and his face was joyful.

Hereward held out the blade of his sword, Biter. 'Swear on the blade of my sword.'

Vikk said, 'Give me another drink first.' So they gave him more ale.

'Now I can stand properly,' he told Hereward. 'But I will not swear on the blade of your sword. That would be no oath for me. King Rolf was a man for the old ways, and it was the custom to swear on the hilt.'

He paused, feeling very tired. His head was dizzy, and there was an intermittent roaring in his ears. It sounded almost like the grinding together of gigantic millstones. Vikk shook his head, putting the odd noise down to the blow he had been given, and Hereward held out Biter's hilt.

'Lord Hereward,' said Vikk, 'I swear to you - with death!'

And in the same instant he drew Biter from the sheath, running Hereward through before anyone could stop him. As Hereward's men cut him down, he gave a great shout of mirth. So Vikk kept his oath to Rolf.

Hereward stood erect, the sword tranfixing his throat at the base. He turned towards Signy, then his eyes unfocused, and he fell, clutching the hem of her dress in his death-struggle.

Thus Hereward died by Froda's sword. He was king of the Danes for six hours.

*

After these events the Danish power declined sadly, for no one was left strong enough to hold the Danes together. Yet men were mindful of their obligations, and the dead of both sides were decently interred. They were not burnt, but laid in mound as they were, along with their weapons. Rolf was buried with Halti, Vikk, and Bothvar to guard him. Rolf held his sword Skofnung, Bothvar his sword Laufi, Halti his axe, and Vikk had no weapon at all. It is told that four hundred winters later, Mithfjarthar-Skeggi broke into Rolf's barrow on a viking expedition. He took Skofnung, and he took Halti's axe, but try as he might, he could not get Laufi from the bones of Bothvar's hand. Skeggi took Skofnung back to Iceland, and lent it to Kormak, who used it in Ireland. It passed after his death to Thorkel Eyjolfsson. He was drowned at sea, but the sword was carried to land stuck in a balk of timber, and Gellir Thorkelsson had it after that in the days of the Normans. When he died, the sword was buried with him at Roskilde, so it came back to rest near enough to Rolf in the end.

*

When Athils got the news of Rolf's death, he was overjoyed. It was the time after Yule when, every nine years, the Swedes held a great religious festival, sacrificing nine men, one for each year, to the gods, together with a great number of animals, so that the total came to ninety-nine. Athils drank prodigiously during the festival, and towards the end of it rode into the temple of Frey on a horse, singing wildly and holding a huge drinking horn in one hand. The horse stumbled, and though in ordinary circumstances Athils would have been in no difficulty, his drunkenness was his undoing. He fell straight over the neck of the horse, striking his head against a stone. He was still chuckling about Rolf as he died.

4

The Dragon in the Mind

A.D. 537-542

I

IN his fiftieth year, Beowulf looked a truly kingly figure. His beard and hair were white as a gull's breast, but he was as strong as ever, with more endurance even than he had possessed when younger. Yet from time to time he would be afflicted by strange dizzy spells, when his senses would reel and he had to clutch at the nearest support to save himself from falling. He had experienced this disability at very long intervals since he was a young man, and had thought little of it, but when the attacks became frequent enough to cause concern, he went to a leech and confided in him. The leech listened gravely. When Beowulf had finished, the wise old man placed a hand on his king's chest and recited a spell. Afterwards he gave Beowulf a stoppered horn containing an infusion which was to be taken as soon as Beowulf felt distressed.

'One moment, lord,' said the leech, as Beowulf was about to go. 'Please shut your eyes.'

Beowulf stood there with his eyes closed, feeling rather undignified.

The leech said, 'Tell me if you hear anything.'

He held a bone comb at a distance of a yard or thereabouts from Beowulf's left ear, and picked at the teeth of the comb with a fingernail.

'I can hear something now,' said the king, 'but what it is I cannot imagine.'

The leech repeated his test at Beowulf's right ear.

'Can you hear anything?'

'No.'

Beowulf could hear nothing until the comb was a foot from his ear.

The leech looked at him gravely.

'When I was a man in my prime, under Hathcyn,' he said, 'there was a youngster who boasted to Bragi that he would kill a sea-pig. Another young hot-head swore to outdo him. The one died, and the other lived, but he may have a price to pay yet. You are going deaf in your right ear, that much is certain, so keep your enemies at your left side. As to these dizzy bouts of yours, I can say little. You may live for years, or you may die tomorrow.'

*

Beowulf told no one of his visit to the leech, nor did he make any alteration to his way of life as a result of that conversation. Yet he changed very much in the year of Rolf's death. For one thing, he took up the practice of minstrelsy. At first he was a very poor performer, and the scop would grind his teeth while the king played, the rest of the company sitting in polite silence meanwhile. But he improved, and at length even the scop could bear to listen with tolerance. He was a cross-grained and tactless old man, but he had a true gift of words, and Beowulf had forgiven him much during his lifetime because of this.

So Beowulf's delight in the long evenings was to sit with the scop, Kei and Vilaf nearby, and improvise on his harp, while the other hearth-retainers drank and talked, quietly.

There were no royal womenfolk in the Geat king's hall, for Beowulf had never forgotten Walthea, though he spoke of her not at all. From time to time he would take a woman, of necessity; yet he knew that none could replace Walthea, the image of whose shining black hair and smoke-blue eyes would rise before him even yet at the most incongruous moments,

making him miss his aim with the spear at a stag, or causing him to stumble on board ship like a drunken man. Some day their ghosts would meet, he told himself, just as their shadows had met like ghosts that night at sea, out from Leire.

Despite the lack of royal women, Beowulf's hall was a splendid place, and comfortable into the bargain. His earls and retainers had no hard benches to sit on, for these were covered with padded cloths embroidered with gold. The Geat banners, raven, boar and swan, stretched magnificently across the pillars of the high seat, and fine tapestries adorned the walls of the mid part of the hall, though the lower part, where lesser men sat, and against the walls of which horses were occasionally stabled, was bare. Yet it was warm and draught-proof, for all that. Beyond the king's seat opposite the central fire, the benches stretched on as far as the cross-bench at the upper end of the dais. This cross-bench accommodated the women and children of the warriors, and was a plainer piece of furniture.

The hall was a busy place at the best of times, but there was even more of a bustle there in the year that Rolf died. Day after day would bring new visits, as the tributary chieftains of the Geats came to the king for news and advice. Vilaf received a valuable education in court practice in a very short time as a result. The chiefs came, were entertained, got their news and their counsel, and were sped on their way with gifts. Beowulf's advice was unvarying. To the chiefs from internal tribes, he said, 'Get your crops in; look to your beasts.' To those whose lands bordered Swedish or Danish territory, he said, 'Hold the border, but make no raids on your own account. Have nothing to do with foreigners, Dane or Swede or wandering trader.' Now these border chiefs lived by raiding and trading across the frontiers, and they felt most disgruntled, until Beowulf told them he was reducing their taxes to a nominal amount. Yet they felt it was odd behaviour for a king, none the less, for a king is dependent, when all is said and

done, not only on his own wealth and prowess, but on those of his tributaries.

One day Kei, who, as a Celt, could be excused questions which would have been impertinent in a Geat, said to the king, 'Lord, just what are you doing? You are ordering everyone to sit still on his bottom. Surely now is the time to make yourself king of all Sweden, and of Denmark too? There is no one left who matters in either of those lands.'

Beowulf plucked a few notes from his harpstrings, humming the old song about the mistletoe and the oak, which was his favourite because it reminded him of his wife, and Kei's because it reminded him of his country.

'Kei, Kei,' he said, laying the harp aside. 'You are a man who loves the green fields, and the sunlight on your face, and the warm thighs of one of my Geat girls about you on the cold nights. Do you want to leave these, and die in helping me to become the king of the world?'

'You could be, lord,' Kei said, his dark face serious.

'Now, come, and do not be a fool. You are a man who has travelled in the world. King of the world indeed! There are some other kings in various odd corners of it who might have something to say about that! Listen to me, Kei, my friend. I am Beowulf the Waymunding, Edgethew's son, king of the Sea-Geats; and men call me Whale-Killer, Grendel's Bane, Man-Crusher, Bear-Breaker.' Beowulf's lips writhed back from his teeth, and he laughed bitterly. 'That is a pretty array of titles. But do you know what I call myself? I am Beowulf the Waymunding, sure enough; I am son of Edgethew and I am king; but I am in addition Friend-Killer, Wife-Slayer and Son's-Bane.'

The Celt gripped Beowulf's arm. 'Quietly, lord! What are you saying?'

'I will tell you. I can confide in you, because you are my friend, and because you are a Celt, and see things differently from the rest of my people. . . . When I was a little boy, I

was a weakling, and despised by everybody. I made myself strong, and dedicated myself to battle, winning honour at an early age, so that I was deemed fit to ride side by side with the seasoned warriors of my dear lord, Hygelac. I heard that king Hroar of the Spear-Danes was in trouble; and, because at that time Dane and Geat were fast friends, I took the whale-road to Leire, where I killed Grendel. Men still sing of that encounter, and the story of it may even linger after my death awhile. Grendel had small comfort when he shook hands with me, Kei. And so I grew to know Hroar. I loved him for the best of men, and listened to his words. He said that peace was the highest good. He was a wise man, and I believed him then. For, when I killed Grendel, I felt no joy in battle, but only pity for the miserable destiny of that wretched creature. Hroar tried to make peace, and he died because of that. So I took his wife, and made war where I could, thinking that Hroar had been wrong. Then my lord Hygelac died because of me, and my best friend, Eofor; for if I had not brought Hroar's wife and son from Denmark, Rorek would never have been the cause of Hygelac's going to seek a glass bowl from the Franks.'

Kei nodded. The tale of Hygelac's glass bowl was well known to him.

Beowulf went on, 'I tried to make Rorek king of the Danes, and he died. And while I was away, as you know, the Swedes killed my wife. All this was my fault. Now consider the state of affairs today. Almost everyone of any account is dead. The line of the Scylding kings in Denmark is no more: Halga, Heregar, Hroar, Rolf and Hereward have died in my lifetime. What is left of Denmark? A rabble of tribes, cutting one another into still smaller pieces! In Sweden, the Scylfings are gone: Angantir, Ottar, Anmund, Onela, Athils - all are dead. So I have no choice. First, I can make war again, and bring Sweden and Denmark under my control. But should I then, even then, be a great king? Kei, you should see the armies of the Franks! They provide a man with means for preventing

him from becoming too conceited. No. War is not the way, Kei. We have tried war, and it has brought no power, but reduced men outside Geatland to a mere wolf-pack. Hroar was right. Peace is best; and therefore I will have peace, and the Geats shall grow strong because of it. I am only sorry that I have learned so late, for those who were dearest to me have perished also in order to bring this home to me.'

'I think you lay too much blame at your own door,' Kei told him.

'Well, there cannot always be one way of looking at things. I am decided in my own mind. But I have talked quite enough. Let us drink now, and sing. Fate weaves the cloth, colour it how we may.'

*

So Beowulf forced the Geats into peace, willy-nilly. He was their king and ring-giver, and so long as he dealt with them as custom demanded, things went well enough – for almost a year. In the meantime, Beowulf revised his first instructions to the border chiefs, permitting them to make raids on their own account, but forbidding them to combine together or to employ forces large enough to start a war which would embroil the whole of Geatland. He was only persuaded to make this modification to his orders because of Kei, who saw quite clearly that Beowulf would be faced with armed rebellion on all sides if he enforced peace too strictly.

Yule approached, and with it the annual after-Yule council. Beowulf was not looking forward to this, for his coffers were becoming low, and he was worried lest he should lose honour by being unable to behave with his usual generosity towards his tributaries and earls. He knew that Rolf had found himself in a similar case towards the end of his life, though for different reasons, and that worried him in addition.

Then, one evening, Kei came before him, leading a ragged harper by a rope halter, Vilaf standing beside the man and guarding him with a spear. It was dim in the hall, and the

torchlight flickered on the man's hollow-cheeked face as he bent his head before the king. He was clutching a small harp tightly with both hands. He was breathing heavily, though whether with fear or with exhaustion Beowulf could not say.

'Who is this, noble Kei?'

'Lord, the man is a Celt, and he says he is a harper. Vilaf found him skulking by the bakery.'

'If a man is found near a bakery, it may be that he has need of food,' said Beowulf. 'Give him meat and beer.'

While Kei called a servant, Vilaf held the harper's rope and said, 'This man is a slave, or has been. See!' and he pushed back the stranger's hair so that his branded forehead might be seen.

'Even a slave must eat. But if he is a slave, how has he managed to keep his harp?'

While the man was tearing at his meat and gulping his ale, Beowulf took up his own harp and strummed it. The man stopped feeding and looked up, his eyes alight. Then he spoke to Kei.

'He thanks you,' Kei told the king, 'and says he will play his harp for you.'

'Tell him that if he is an escaped Geat slave, he must die. But I will gladly hear him before his head parts company from his body.'

Kei interpreted. The man spoke at length, with many interruptions as Kei stopped him to clarify various points.

'He says he was no slave of the Geats, but of the Picts.'

'Picts?'

'They are a northern nation in Britain,' Kei explained. 'This man was captured by them and subjected to the foulest indignities. He escaped overseas with a party of Saxon raiders and has made his way north with great difficulty. He has picked up enough food to keep himself alive, for he is a harper. He has not been well treated, however, for his style of playing is not generally appreciated over here. It was the Picts who branded

him, and they also did other things which he finds too disgusting to name. The Picts are vicious beyond telling, lord, and greatly feared in northern Britain, so I can well believe him. He says his name is Iori.'

'Tell him that he may play for me.'

Kei brought a low stool, and Iori sat down with the small harp. Then he played. Beowulf knew enough of the Celtic mode of harping to realize that Iori was exceptionally accomplished, and the tears of nostalgia on Kei's cheeks also testified to the stranger's skill. When the notes of the little harp ceased, Beowulf called for a fine robe to be given to Iori, and said that he was to be given a place at the board next to, but below, that of the royal scop.

'Privately,' he said, 'I think that this Iori is a better player than my scop. But I do not know anything of Iori's skill in versifying; indeed, even if he had been the greatest poet in Britain, it would mean little to me, since I should be almost completely unable to understand him. Wash him well, though, before he sits at my board.'

Then he gave Iori a gold neck-ring. The Celt tucked it in a worn leather bag at his waist, and as he did so, a thought struck him, and he spoke to Kei.

'The man would like to hear you play, lord, if you will honour him.'

Beowulf smiled; then, nodding his head in assent, he played a short tune. When he had finished, Iori took something from the leather bag and handed it to Kei, speaking very solemnly.

'Iori says that he has little to offer the kingly harper who sits before him; but the great Beowulf might be pleased to take this.'

It was an amulet of crystal held in a golden claw; two links of silver chain fastened it to a golden broochplate. At the back of the plate was the pin of the brooch, and on the front Beowulf saw that runes had been cut. He needed no priest to read the runes which stood for Froda's name.

His face was pale as he said, 'Kei, ask him where he got this thing!'

2

The sacrifices and the orgy of Mothers' Night passed off well, and so did the council afterwards, until the last day or so. Most of the disputes brought before Beowulf for judgement were trivial enough; they were the usual manslaughters, cattle-hefts and adulteries, misdemeanours similar to those which cropped up every year. That year, certainly, there were many more than usual, for the Geats in general had found peace irksome, and had beguiled the time by making their own amusements. Towards the end of the council, Beowulf and his senior counsellors had grown thoroughly tired of the complaining sounds of men's voices.

Most of Beowulf's tributary chiefs and earls brought with them only a token company of retainers. Besides disputants and witnesses, the most important taxpayers were there to render their dues to the king – headmen among the fishermen and farmers, and the most influential of the border chiefs. One man, however, a chief from northern Scania, was accompanied by a large following. Each of his men ate and drank even more than was customary at a Yule feast, and their chief, whose name was Mord, remarked often and in a loud voice how much he was looking forward to a renewal of his pledges to Beowulf, the most generous of men.

That was Beowulf's problem. His own personal treasury, which he kept in his hall, was empty save for a few rings and rinkets of no great value, a number of swords and one small chest of coins. So he visited the treasury of the Geat nation. The chief priest, riding on a white mare, went with him, for not even the king himself could enter the sacred ash grove without a priestly escort. Inside the grove was a temple and a college of priests, and behind the temple lay the great treasury, hedged about with quickthorn so closely set that

it was impenetrable save for one heavily guarded gap.

For a king, Beowulf had always been comparatively uninterested in treasure, except in so far as it was a means to honour; and he had not visited the treasury in person for the past two years. He was astonished to find that the hoard was woefully scanty. His treasurer, Siward, was always telling him that there was little gold in the nation's coffers, but Siward had talked similarly when the Geats had been rich, so Beowulf had dismissed the old man's words as the natural pessimism of a good treasurer. Beowulf sent for the man at once, and, after Siward and he had made an estimate of the treasure remaining, they went back to the hall with long faces.

'Now perhaps you feel that all those tax remissions were unwise, as I told you at the time,' Siward said. 'When you have dealt with your guests according to their due, you will be a pauper king.'

Beowulf clapped Siward on the shoulder. 'Cheer up, old man. There will soon be gold enough and to spare, for always. I promise you that.'

His words were cheerful enough, but his eyes were sad. He was thinking of the tale of Iori the harper, who had brought to him the brooch with Froda's runes on it. So, at the end of the feast, he dealt out treasures to all those who deserved them (and many who did not), afterwards saying that he proposed a great expedition to Britain in the spring, and giving a glowing account of the rich pickings that his followers might expect. For he had decided to take Froda's treasure in a last war which would ensure peace for ever in Geatland.

Beowulf saw himself forced to this decision by a long series of events, ever since Walthea had confided to him the whereabouts of Froda's vast hoard. He had been tempted to try and obtain it to help Rorek; but Rorek had had no need of it in the end. Then Kei had come to him. At their first meeting the Celt had mentioned Truda of Northumbria, and on many subsequent occasions Kei had talked of her wealth, her cruelty, and

her beauty. Beowulf had often felt a presentiment that he and Truda would meet, and Iori's story had strengthened that feeling, though it had also filled him with foreboding. Iori had told him that Truda had made him play to her in a great hall filled with gold while she made love on a couch of furs with a nobleman. After she had taken her pleasure, Truda had called, and armed men had killed her lover as he lay at her side. Then she had rewarded Iori with the brooch, and sent him away.

*

After the taxes had been paid, Beowulf began recruiting men for his expedition to Britain. There was no lack of men. Mord was amongst the first to reaffirm his desire to serve, for Beowulf had won him over by his generous treatment. In all, Beowulf took with him over a thousand men, in some hundred and sixty ships. Vilaf was to remain at home, as regent, and, though he knew that this was a signal honour which would assure him the eventual kingship of the Geats, the young man was heartbroken at having to stay behind. Beowulf took Kei and Iori in his own ship.

'Now then,' he said, as the fleet weathered the Skaw and made westward, 'Kei and Iori, be my counsellors.'

Kei looked west over the grey waves. 'I did not think to be going home in the company of a Geat war-fleet,' he said. 'What do you want to know, lord?'

'What is the situation in the interior of Northumbria now?'

Kei said, 'My own information is doubtless out of date, but Iori may be able to add to it. When I left, there was much confusion in Northumbria. There were three kingdoms there. Firstly, up in the north on the coast, there were the Bernice, men speaking the same tongue as yourself, or something very like it.'

Iori said, 'The Bernice are Angles, and they are only a small nation, greatly harassed by the Picts. Yet they are strong, and will, I think, grow stronger. But you simplify too much, Kei.'

There are many other small nations up there in the north.'

Kei translated, but Beowulf interrupted him. 'Never mind the details for the moment, except for one thing. Who is king of the Bernice?'

Beowulf learnt that the king was a very old man, Garulf, and that the power lay in the hands of his son, prince Ido.

'So much for that, then. In the north, the Bernice and others. Angles. Continue.'

'The only Celts of any account in the north are led by king Dutigern, a bold and noble uncle of mine,' said Kei. 'In the south and east, right down to the river Humber, are the Dera, one nation made out of many, who banded themselves together against my people. The Dera, too, are Angles, though I presume they are of different stock from the Bernice. They are the implacable enemies of my people, and when I sailed for Denmark I had to do so from the country of the Lindisfara, south of Humber. The king of the Dera, Romund, traces his descent right back to your god Odin.'

'And so can any king, myself included,' said Beowulf. 'What of your own people, finally?'

'We are the Celts of Elmet. When I left, our nation had been divided into two by the loss of Tadcaster and Selby to the Dera. The northern part was ruled by my cousin, prince Geraint, and the southern – the larger – by queen Truda. She was at Sherburn-in-Elmet when I last saw her.' Again he spoke to Iori.

Kei then continued, 'Iori says that Truda was at Oulton when he met her. That is deep in the woods. The forest of Elmet is seventy miles from east to west, and twenty-five miles deep. My guess is that she will still be at Oulton, or near it. The Dera would hardly pursue her there. Besides, Geraint will be keeping them busy, if I know him. What is in your mind, lord?'

Beowulf smiled. 'That you and Iori must teach me a little of your language. I have wasted much time. I learnt a word or two from my wife, but nothing to boast of.'

So he practised Celtic phrases on the voyage, making Kei

and Iori speak their native tongue with him. He soon came to speak well enough for the simplest purposes, and to understand much more. Privately, he thought that the words which Walthea had taught him might also come in useful. Kei and Iori would have wondered at this, had they known that these were words of love.

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They made their landfall off Flamborough Head, and the fleet immediately hove to while Beowulf called his earls aboard his ship for counsel. There was a roast sheep to eat, and ale in a great silver-handled leather bucket, from which the earls helped themselves with silver ladles. Beowulf had arrayed himself in clean, untarnished war-gear, and he stood out in marked contrast to the rest of the men, whose mailshirts were dirty and corroded despite liberal applications of rancid and stinking bear-fat. Thus men saw that he was king, and listened submissively to his orders.

He reminded them that this was an expedition for booty, and he intended to see that they got it. The first party, under Mord, was to sail northward up the coast as far as Holy Island, landing near there and pursuing their way through the country of the Bernice till they made contact with Kei's uncle, Dutigern.

Beowulf said, 'It may not be necessary for you to fight the Bernice, Mord; I do not know. If their prince, Ido, is the young man he seems to be from Kei's accounts, however, I expect it will be war. But I lay it on your head to make peaceful overtures to king Garulf of the Bernice. Tell him you have no quarrel with him, but that you seek a road to Dutigern. He may give you safe conduct. Once you reach Dutigern, you are to suggest an alliance against the Picts. Dutigern will probably be overjoyed to mount a strong force against them, and he should agree to a very generous division of your spoils. Is that clear?'

Mord nodded.

'Good. You are to make your own way back to Geatland.

Remember that if Ido cannot persuade Garulf to fight you as soon as he sees you, and if Garulf does give you passage through his land, Ido may change the old man's mind for him as soon as you have passed inland. So leave a strong guard on your ships, and be prepared to have to fight your way back to them. Remember the Bernice are Angles, and not Geats!

Iori spoke, and Beowulf smiled, saying to Mord, 'Iori asks you to kill all the Picts south of Strathclyde, wherever that may be. Farewell now, Mord, and luck go with you.'

While Mord's ships resumed their stations, waiting for the ebb tide on which they were to leave, Beowulf unfolded the rest of his plan.

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On the following day, the remaining ships sailed southwards. Opposite Hornsea the whole fleet, with the exception of Beowulf's vessel, turned for the shore, while Beowulf held on to his southerly course. The main party had instructions to win booty from the Dera, fighting their way overland to Howden by way of Beverley: this foray through the heart of the Dera territory would provide all those who sought honour with the chance to gain it, or death.

Beowulf's ship had a swan head; it had been one of Hygelac's favourite ships. The prow, therefore, had none of the intrinsically warlike quality of the dragon's head. This was as well, for as the ship progressed, it began to transform itself into a trading vessel; bales of merchandise were stacked prominently on deck, after the shield-wall had been taken down and Beowulf had arrayed himself in the robes of a rich merchant. He kept on his mailshirt beneath the robes. This was lucky, too, for as they made their way up the Humber an arrow, fired by some rider on the north bank, struck Beowulf squarely between the shoulders. The force of the shaft was by no means spent, as it had an iron head, and it penetrated Beowulf's cloak until stopped by the mailshirt. Beowulf shook his fist at the shore and raved at his assailant for attacking an honest trader.

The archer waved derisively and then spurred westward.

'Some good may come of that,' said Beowulf philosophically. 'He will report us as a merchant ship. But let me get this mail-shirt off for a moment, and someone rub my back.'

They anchored two or three miles upstream from Goole, and then, at a small village on the north bank, they hired horses, ostensibly to take themselves and their wares to Howden. But as soon as the village was out of sight, the cavalcade turned off the track and westwards across open country.

'No one will miss us,' Kei said jubilantly, 'for the Dera will have their hands full by now. Your main force should be on its way to Beverley, and no doubt even Howden will be in confusion at the news of the attack. If a party of merchants should fail to arrive - well, the Dera will have other things to think about.'

'Exactly,' said Beowulf.

They camped that evening on the edge of Elmet; the setting sun turned the forest into a great, dark bastion across the horizon.

Beowulf and Kei awoke at dawn, and went together to the brook which ran down from the forest. As they did so, small trout sped in panic to the shelter of pebbles. After he had drunk, Beowulf splashed his head and neck with the clear, cold water. Kei looked at him and felt a deep affection for this man, so different from himself.

'This is a world of divided loyalties, lord,' he said sadly, as the tips of the forest trees turned from black to dark green in the sun's long rays. 'Here am I, leading you, an enemy of my people, to befool and plunder them. And yet I do it gladly. Why? Why should I not slit your throat as you sleep, or send a message on ahead to warn Truda why you are visiting her?'

Beowulf answered, 'Because you are my man, and to break your sworn oath would make you no man at all, but a thing to

be pitied and despised – most of all by yourself, as you are perfectly well aware.’

‘My mother was only a concubine, though my father was a king’s brother. What sort of man does that make me? My cousin Geraint rules as a prince in his own right, and he can afford the luxuries of the noble virtues. But can I?’

‘You debase yourself. I want to hear no more talk of this sort. The gods help a man who stands up for himself, does not lose his nerve, and thinks quickly in a tight corner. Your father’s blood is in you. Spend a little less time puzzling over your problems, and you may find yourself becoming a greater prince than this Geraint. Come now, tell me more about Truda while we eat.’

Beowulf learnt then what he had dimly suspected before: that Truda was not the same woman who had been Froda’s mistress, but her daughter. She had been brought up in far-off Dyfed; but she was so like her mother that, when at last she succeeded to the throne in Northumbria and came to claim it, men cried in fear that the old queen had been raised in her pristine youth from the dead. Truda had seen no reason to suppress such rumours; indeed, she had encouraged them, and many a legend had grown up about her. She consorted closely with druids, and was reputed to be skilled in witchcraft. Evil, treacherous and bloodthirsty, she hated all men except as the instruments of pleasure, for she was cursed with an insatiable fleshly lust from which, as Kei had found out, not even her male kinsfolk were safe. Yet she was unable to take any pleasure in a man after she had once made love with him. This led her to devise a cruel sport. She would sleep with a suitor and afterwards challenge him to guess a riddle. If he failed to guess it, he was killed at once. If, as very occasionally happened, he gave the correct answer to the riddle, he was not killed, but castrated and given to the druids. When Beowulf objected that once such a practice became known, the supply of suitors was bound to dry up quickly, Kei said it was not so.

Truda was so beautiful that when men saw her their wits became weak in the same proportion as other attributes gained in strength. Further, the queen was incapable of being satisfied by the attentions of her official suitors, and she took many men, noble and base-born, to her bed, having them killed afterwards without the formality of the riddle contest. It was one of these men whose death Iori had witnessed.

From Iori, Beowulf learnt that the armed men who had killed Truda's lover had been concealed behind the hangings in the treasure chamber where the queen slept. He also discovered that it was Truda's custom to promise the treasure to the man who should please her permanently. Beowulf knew that men would do strange things for gold; they would risk their lives for a twentieth part of the value of a treasure like Froda's.

'Every cock thinks he can tread the hens harder than every other cock,' he chuckled to Iori; 'and if the hen is likely to lay an egg of pure gold, then the dunghills of all Britain will be deserted while their masters crow at Truda's door!'

Then Beowulf sent Kei and Iori away: he much preferred his explanation to that of Kei. The lust for women was soon satisfied, but the lust for gold grew as a man's hoard of it grew; and the lure of Truda's gold explained the readiness with which suitors came forward far more convincingly than Kei's tales of the woman's beauty. Beowulf then sat thoughtfully alone for half an hour before giving the order to move into Elmet.

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That day, the small party of men lay hidden only a furlong or so from the edge of the forest. At nightfall, they set out again. It was fortunate that Kei was with them, for he knew the ground fairly well, having hunted in Elmet since his early youth. Even so, the going was very bad, on account of the thick underbrush. Beowulf's Geats were scared of forest-trolls, and their fear robbed them of much of their strength. So

progress was slow; Kei would not allow them to use the paths on which they chanced from time to time.

On the third night of their journey, bruised, scratched, and with the Geat retainers trembling from nervous exhaustion (though Beowulf had explained that there were no trolls in Britain, they did not believe him), they arrived close to Oulton and lay low. In the morning Beowulf set four men to clean and burnish his finest accoutrements, and he kept them at it all day. Then he put them on. He wore a shining mailshirt, the rings of which were intertwined with gold and silver wire. Jewels gleamed on his chest and shoulders. He had on his most valuable helmet, which was of gold-plated bronze, with a tubular iron outer framework on which precious wire had been threaded to match the mailshirt. His sword, Nailing, was furbished so that it hurt a man's eyes to look at it when it was unsheathed. The scabbard was of polished leather inlaid with silver, as was his swordbelt; his sax had a similar inlay on its bone handle. Beowulf's neck collar was the gold one given to him by Hygelac long ago. He put on a crimson cloak, and secured it at his shoulder with the brooch which had been Froda's, and which Truda had given Iori. The harper said that Truda had picked the brooch casually from a pile of trinkets and tossed it to him, hardly seeming to glance at it. This was fortunate, for the success of the plan which had been forming in Beowulf's mind depended on Truda's failure to recognize the brooch.

Just before dusk, Iori was sent forward as a herald, to inform Truda that her nephew was returned from overseas, begging Truda to receive him mercifully on account of the rich gifts he had for her, he and his party of foreign merchants. Soon, their bales and barrels were piled in Truda's chamber, where Kei sat with Truda. Iori and the Geats were feasting in the dining hall. But Beowulf himself was nowhere to be seen.

3

Queen Truda looked at Kei speculatively. He was staring over her shoulder at the great gold hoard which had belonged to Froda. There were piles of priceless armour of all sorts, gleaming with gold; there were a score of leather sacks stuffed with gold coins - Frankish, Roman, Byzantine. There were half-open chests, gaping and dribbling jewels and gold; there were untidy heaps of cups, bowls, goblets and platters, all of gold. Truda had not been given to displaying all this incalculable wealth in Kei's day in her court; he thought that she must have become very sure of herself and of her power, or else the need for sudden departures in the face of attacks from the Dera prevented the proper stowage of the treasure. Truda lay on her furs with her back to the hoard, and smiled lazily at her nephew. There was a hint of contempt in her smile, however.

'So you have come back to me, have you, with your tail between your legs? I hope there is a good reason for your visit. Things may turn out awkwardly for you otherwise.'

There was a charcoal fire burning in a brazier behind the queen. Torches flared in portable stands, and their reflected light winked from a thousand points among the treasure. Kei and Truda were alone, yet Kei noted that the hangings on the walls stirred slightly from time to time, although it was a perfectly calm, still, evening. There was a touch of frost in the air; and the queen, who was dressed only in a light robe, stretched a hand to the warmth. The movement tightened the thin material of her robe over her breasts and belly, and Kei saw that her figure was still that of a nubile young girl, untouched by time. There were copper lights in her dark hair; her face was in shadow, but Kei knew that its perfect oval was without a wrinkle; only her eyes, green and narrow, betrayed her essential viciousness.

'Well?' she said. 'Do not keep me waiting, Kei.'

Kei seemed to hesitate. 'Certain gifts -' he began diffidently.

'Am I a fool, Kei? Do you expect me to believe that you would come back here merely to bring me gifts? As you must know, I am rich enough already.'

Kei fidgeted with an amulet which he wore round his neck. The queen looked at him a moment longer, and then threw back her head with laughter.

'Do not say you have returned to take advantage of the opportunity you missed before!'

Kei still said nothing.

'Come here!' Truda commanded.

He went over to her, and stood by the couch of furs.

'Sit down. No, closer!'

Kei seated himself by the queen, who wriggled her knees under his,

'Now we can talk comfortably,' she said, 'before the evening concludes itself one way or the other. I seem to detect that you are keeping something back. Now tell me.'

Kei said, 'Lady, nothing escapes your notice. I must confess that your beauty blinded me before, so that I ran from it as an animal runs from fire. I am here to place myself at your disposal, even though the fire consumes me utterly.'

'That is more than likely,' Truda commented. 'I am glad that you have had second thoughts. Off with your clothes, then: it will be warmer under these furs than on them.'

Kei restrained her with a hand on her shoulder, saying, 'Please. I am trying to control myself. There is something which you must know, and which is the real reason for my return.'

The queen sat bolt upright. 'Aha! We are coming to it at last, are we? Go on, Kei.'

Sweating with relief, Kei began his story. Beowulf had rehearsed him in it until he was word-perfect.

He knew that Truda would be familiar with the story of

Froda's death, but that it was highly unlikely that she knew anything of the subsequent events. So he told her of Froda's son, Ingeld, and of Starkath; of their deaths at Leire, and of the rivalry which had existed between Rolf and Hereward. All this was, of course, true. But then Kei began the most important part of his tale. He hoped fervently that their isolation from the coast had prevented the Celts of Elmet from learning anything about these incidents, and that Truda would accept the lies he was about to tell. He said that Hereward had been a great prince, with miraculous powers of sorcery. Kei had become one of Hereward's most trusted retainers, and had often been privileged to assist him in his witchcraft.

'Perhaps some small part of the skill which you are known to possess has come down to me, lady,' he said to Truda.

'Go on!' said the queen. All thoughts of love-making forgotten for the present, she had moved away from Kei and was listening enthralled, her hands clasped about her knees.

'Hereward knew that Froda had owned a vast treasure. He coveted this; but he did not know where it was. So he determined to raise the ghost of Froda from the dead. As you know, if a ghost is raised in a certain manner, it is bound to answer whatever questions it is asked. Well, Hereward succeeded. I was present at the conjuration, and I followed the procedure very closely: in fact, so closely that I should be able to imitate it at need. But I must tell you what happened when Hereward invoked Froda's ghost. Froda told him where the treasure was, to begin with. Hereward then asked whether he would become king of the Danes, and Froda replied that he would. He omitted to explain that Hereward's kingship would last exactly six hours, but that is by the way. Next, Hereward asked if it would be given to him to recover Froda's treasure. "No," said Froda, "I shall go and claim it myself when the time comes. I have a great desire to see the Truda who now reigns, for by all accounts she is very like her mother, and I know for a fact that I had no hand in her making. I can see clearly where she lies

asleep now, Hereward; and she seems to be a woman after my own heart. She and I are fated to meet; and in that hour I shall get my treasure again, while Truda will gain life for ever with me.”

Truda gasped. ‘Is that what he said? Are you sure?’

‘As sure as that I sit here, blinded by your beauty again, lady.’

‘But – a ghost, an insubstantial thing!’

‘Make no mistake,’ said Kei. ‘The ghosts of those countries eastward over the sea are no mere shades, but they seem flesh and blood, just as I am. One thing only they cannot do, and that is cross running water. Nor can they eat or drink without certain tiresome preliminaries. Except for those disadvantages, which are easily outweighed by their immortality and their foreknowledge, they are just like ourselves.’

Truda was trembling. ‘So?’

‘So I propose to summon Froda’s ghost – now, this very evening.’

‘For me?’

‘For you, lady. It seems that when I ran away from you, I was destined to bring back to you the greatest gift of all.’

‘If this is true,’ the queen said slowly, standing up and gazing at Kei, ‘you may ask of me what you will. This is the very height and summit of witchcraft. If you are lying to me, however, you will die, and it will take you six weeks, during every moment of which you will be screaming.’

‘I should hardly have returned had I not been confident of my powers,’ rejoined Kei, ‘so let us put them to the test.’

He went over to one of the barrels which had been brought by Beowulf’s party, opened it, and came back to Truda with a bundle. He left the barrel open. Leading Truda to the charcoal fire, he positioned her with her back to the barrel, facing the treasure hoard. Then he undid the bundle. He threw something from it on to the fire, and there was a foul smell. It was a piece of mutton fat.

'The fat of a new-born baby,' he explained to Truda. 'Then I cast into the fire a lock of hair from a virgin.'

The hair he dropped on the fire was taken from the head of Wals, one of Beowulf's retainers. He had soft, blond hair; but he was no virgin - he was a notorious womanizer.

A few drops of wine were sprinkled on; then Kei took out his dagger. He cut some of Truda's hair, as raggedly as he could, pared her nails, and pricked the ball of her thumb. Hair and nail trimmings, and three or four drops of blood, were cast into the fire. They were followed by a handful of powder. There was a flash and an acrid smell, together with a great quantity of smoke. Kei began to chant solemn gibberish, closing the queen's eyelids with his thumbs.

While all this was going on, Beowulf climbed stiffly out of the barrel, and moved to the hangings on the wall. Five times his sax flickered like a lizard's tongue, and five times he caught the body of one of Truda's retainers, rolling him out of sight. Then he stood motionless, some ten or twelve paces behind Truda and Kei. He wore a patch on the left eye.

Kei finished his long and meaningless incantation by calling three times, 'Froda! Froda! Froda!' after which he took his thumbs from Truda's eyelids.

Beowulf said, in a hollow voice, 'Here I am. What do you want of me?'

Truda spun round, and gave a low moan when she saw the kingly figure dressed in the full splendour of its royal war-trappings. Kei stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders, holding her, until she sank to her knees, whether with fright or in supplication Kei did not know.

Kei said, 'This is Truda, daughter of one whom you knew well, dread Froda. See!' He snatched a torch from its stand and held it so that Truda's face was in its light.

'Ah!' breathed Beowulf. 'It is as I said. The living likeness of her mother. We passed many wonderful hours together, she

and I; but she is gone where I cannot recall her, despite all my craft. She was burned after her death, was she not?’

Truda nodded dumbly.

‘I thought so,’ said Beowulf. ‘I, too, nearly died by fire. That would have prevented my return in this form. I have long sought your mother in the chill halls of death, but to no avail; I have searched the windy paths above the seas until I came to a summer land called Afalon, but Truda I did not find. And then in a vision it came to me that I would meet another Truda, fairer than her mother, if that were possible. The man who was with Hereward has called me, not by his own will, but by mine. This may seem a strange love speech, Truda. Could you love me, not for an hour, as you have made a show of loving others, but for all the hours and days and years to come, not changing even though the very face of the earth changes, until seas dry up and the great mountains wear down into plains?’

Truda grovelled towards him, still on her knees, her face distorted, crying, ‘Yes, oh yes! Froda, you are my true lord, and I loved you as soon as I saw you. I could love you for ever. But how can this be?’

‘Come forward, and clasp my knees.’

Truda did as she was bidden.

‘Can you feel a man, or a thing of air?’

‘Lord, your power almost makes me faint. You seem of flesh and blood, though stronger than the strongest man, even though your hair is white.’

‘Listen to me. Would you live with me for ever? Would you grow tired of me during the long summer days in Afalon, for it is upon Afalon that I have set my heart? There the heroes of your race feast and make love through the warm afternoon of eternity. Shall we go there, you and I, and enjoy great honour with my treasure, which you have kept faithfully for me?’

Truda seemed demented. She writhed at Beowulf’s feet, sobbing, ‘Yes, yes, yes!’

‘Then be silent, and attend. This man will give you a

potion to drink, and then his task will be done. Before you take it, you are to order safe conduct for him and his men, for he has served us well. Then you will sleep, and in that sleep you will come to me for ever.'

Beowulf unbuckled Froda's brooch from his shoulder, and handed it to the kneeling woman.

'Take this brooch. Hold it in your hand, for it will bring you to me. That is all your treasure now. Get up.'

Truda rose slowly, shaking.

'Go back to the fire, and look closely into it.'

She did so; and when Kei finally told her to look up, she saw that she was alone with him. She sat down on her furs, shuddering and passing a hand over her eyes.

Kei gave her a goblet containing wine. 'Do not drink yet,' he warned her. 'Send for the captain of your soldiers. Order him to give us safe conduct, and then tell him that you are not to be disturbed till dawn.'

Truda obeyed, giving the orders like one talking in sleep. When the man had gone, Kei said, 'Drink now, and set out on your journey.'

She looked into the goblet for a moment, trembling once more, and then drank deeply.

'I am behaving like a mad woman, Kei,' she said. 'But I love him, and I would follow him even into death.'

The drinking vessel slipped from her hand, and she fell back on the furs.

'You can come out again now, Beowulf,' said Kei. 'You are a truly marvellous ghost!'

'And a mighty stiff one,' said Beowulf. He looked at Truda as she lay insensible, Froda's brooch clutched in her hand. She had dropped the goblet, but still held on to the brooch so tightly that the tang of the clasp had pierced her palm. 'That will certainly be all her treasure. Come now, hurry! Get the men here on some pretext - say that Truda wishes to thank them personally for bringing the gifts, but would like them to

take them to trade with the Dera, and bring back what intelligence they can. Then out with all that trash, and in with Froda's treasure!'

He laughed hugely though silently, his chest heaving. Then, all at once, he reeled, grasping at Kei for support and panting.

'What is it, lord?' Kei asked, in alarm.

The dark mists receded from Beowulf's eyes, and the roaring in his head subsided gradually. 'Nothing,' he said. 'Only let us speak no more of Froda for a while. This plan succeeded, but it is a poor trick to play upon a woman.'

'A woman! She is a monster. You should have poisoned her, and not merely sent her to sleep.'

'Enough. I will not descend to poisoning women, even one such as Truda. Well, I have got a huge treasure, and got it peacefully. But I am beginning to have second thoughts about the whole matter.'

'Then we must certainly hurry,' said Kei. 'Only the thought of all that gold has sustained me through the past few hours. And I, for one, want to be as far away from here as I can when Truda wakes up!'

*

When a man is very rich, more riches are apt to come to him unbidden. Thus, when Beowulf met the rest of his fleet again off Flamborough Head, he found that they had taken great booty from the Dera, who were engaged with Geraint in a bloody war. The Angles had preferred to buy the Geats off with silver, though only after heavy fighting had convinced them that the Geats would weaken them in their struggles against the Celts. The Geats had lost almost a half of their warriors, but they took this calmly. Death in battle meant honour for those who died, and a bigger share of the plunder for the survivors.

Beowulf called his chiefs aboard his ship, and praised them. Froda's hoard lay in the well abaft the fire, but the gold was covered with a spare sail.

'Noble friends,' said Beowulf, 'I am sure that the men of the Dera will remember the Geats for a long time, and will shiver when they recall those who came from the sea, bringing feast-time for wolf and crow. Your names will make children cry in that country when greybeards tell them in years to come of your prowess in battle. You have done well indeed.'

There was a growl of approval.

'And now,' he continued, 'I have another thing to say. Some of you seemed a little put out when I announced my intention of leaving you to get on with the business of fighting the Dera by yourselves. That was foolish. I hope you did not think me a coward?'

'No, by Odin!' they roared.

Beowulf smiled. 'You shout loudly enough now. Well, let that pass. I will tell you what I have been doing. I have been raiding a bakery!'

The men's jaws dropped in astonishment.

'Yes,' said the king. 'Kei and I, and a few others sneaked through a troll-haunted forest. A woman was in charge of the bakery, but we contrived to outwit her, and came away with a good store of loaves and flour. See!'

He made a sign, and the sail was removed from Froda's treasure. Men whistled with amazement, growing pale at the sight of so much gold, and pinching themselves to find that they were indeed awake.

'There are the loaves, and there is the flour. Froda milled it long ago, and baked it. Drink now, and feast your eyes while you fill your bellies. I think no one in Geatland will be able to say that our expedition was not a success when we return.'

*

Two days later, Beowulf's ships sighted and attacked a Saxon fleet. The Geats were in such a high mood that they overcame the Saxons easily. Afterwards, they stood on the slippery red decks among the corpses and laughed, for the fleet was

escorting four Saxon treasure ships, laden with gold, silver and amber. The Geats were rich, and no mistake. Their vessels laboured along, low in the water with their weight of treasure, until at last the anchor-stones thumped into the water in the shelter of Whale's Ness, and Vilaf was waving to Beowulf from the landing jetty.

Mord's party did not return to Geatland until September, bringing with them small booty and few men. Mord was alive, and in a bitter frame of mind. He and his men had fought their way through the country of the Bernice, for prince Ido had persuaded the old king Garulf to resist them. The Celt, Dutigern, had proved proud and overbearing, unwilling to accept allies from overseas. He had turned them away, and so they had struggled south, burning and killing, till they had reached the territory over which Geraint ruled. Mord had killed Geraint, and thus obtained the friendship of the Dera near York, for they did not connect him with Beowulf's men. The Dera had enabled Mord to reach the coast, and so he and his weary remnant of followers gained their ships again after having travelled in a large circle.

Mord's story threatened to cause trouble. Kei had been fond of his cousin Geraint, and he had acquired a Geat sense of the duty of revenge. He was all for challenging Mord to battle, but Beowulf managed to settle matters peaceably. He praised Mord publicly for his valour, firstly. Then he gave the chief gold to pay Geraint's man-price to Kei, and with that Kei had to rest content. Finally, Beowulf shared the treasure won from the Saxons and the Dera among all the men who had ventured abroad. He kept a large portion for himself, as was fitting, and out of this he rewarded Vilaf and those of his retainers who had been ordered to remain at home. But Froda's gold he quite refused to touch. He took a few trusted men and buried the treasure in an old tumulus about a mile east of Whale's Ness, hoping to be able to rule without using it. He had a very strong feeling that Froda's hoard was unchancy. Froda's possessions

seemed to bring little luck to those who had them after him. The ring Sviagris had dishonoured Athils; Froda's arms had caused Staghall to go up in flames, and Hroar, Ingeld and Wulfgar had died then; Froda's sword had killed Rolf, and Hereward after him. Beowulf felt that the ground was the best custodian of such treasure. Yet men knew what he had done, and although they dared take no open action against him, many of them murmured against him, saying that he was ring-stingy. This was true with regard to Froda's treasure, but with the rest of his wealth Beowulf was utterly open-handed, so much so that not two years after his expedition to Britain he was in the same plight as before he went there.

Some might have said that he was in a worse case, had they known of what took place when Truda awoke and found Kei gone, and her treasure with him. How she discovered what had really happened, or, indeed, if she ever knew in fact, is not clear. What is certain is that she at once called a gorsedd of druids, and laid a curse upon the gold. Then she sent heralds across the sea from the country of the Lindisfara to all the lands eastward. In due course one of these envoys arrived in Geatland. Men heard him with stony faces as he proclaimed that the great queen Truda had been robbed of a vast hoard, and that in consequence she had set a dragon guardian over it wherever it might be, so that misfortune and eventual ruin would fall on the heads of those who now possessed it. The herald went away, and then the Geats turned upon Beowulf in a terrible indecision.

4

Beowulf looked tired and old, so old that a scop in later days was led to assert that Beowulf ruled for fifty winters over the Geats; yet he was only fifty-three. He sat under the canopied pillars of his high seat, his hand clenched on an ale-horn, and sighed.

'Can a man not enjoy his ale in peace?' he asked, his jesting

tone hiding his dismay at what Kei had just said. Iori stood silently just behind Kei.

'Lord, release us from our bond to you,' repeated Kei.

'But why do you wish to leave me now?'

'It is time for us to go. We have served you as best we could, and we want to return again to Britain,' said Kei. 'I am going to Dyfed, or it may be to Powys, for I have learned that Truda is dead, and I shall be safe in Britain now. Iori would like to accompany me.'

'You too, Iori?' said the king, sadly.

Iori said nothing.

'Kei, you have not told me everything. I thought that you and I had reached a degree of friendship unusual between master and man, and between people of alien races. But now I begin to wonder if I have ever understood you. Among those of my race it is customary for a retainer to repay his mead to his lord. That time of repayment may be at hand very soon, yet you wish to go. Why?'

'Lord, there is a word *hiraeth* in my tongue. It means longing, and homesickness, and much else that I cannot translate. *Hiraeth* is upon me now, and upon Iori, and we must go, though it tears our hearts to do so.'

Tears were in Iori's eyes; though he still said nothing, he plucked his harp and began the mistletoe song.

Beowulf choked for a moment, then he leaped up, overturning the trestle and shouting, 'Enough! Would you kill me?'

His face contorted, he drew his sword and struck. Iori's severed hand twitched a moment on the harpstrings, and then fell, while his light blue robe blotched suddenly scarlet. Men ran to the kitchens for mutton fat to be melted, and Iori screamed when they dipped the stump of his hand in it. It might have healed well enough, but life without harping was no life for Iori, and he died the same night. Kei left the next morning, and Beowulf watched the sail grow small and vanish

on the western horizon, upbraiding himself for having finally betrayed his own ideals.

So began the time of ill-luck for the Geats.

*

It began with a pestilence, which carried off many strong warriors and many women and children. Men said that the plague was caused by the breath of the dragon which everyone knew guarded the barrow where Froda's treasure lay. Beowulf expressed no opinion; he behaved generously to his own people, as before, but had little truck with foreigners after Kei left. The pestilence was followed by an outbreak of fires: dwellings broke out in flames in the middle of the night; hay-ricks were burned; and, one day, no man knew how, the great hall of Beowulf himself caught fire. It was utterly consumed. Beowulf remembered that day when he had returned from Leire to find his town on fire and his wife dead. His hall had escaped serious damage on that occasion, but now it was gone. He recalled the joy he had had with Walthea when the hall was building; a drift of adze-shavings through which she had kicked her way; their love-making in the green woods; the secret of Froda's treasure which she had whispered to him afterwards. It had brought him round to this. Ashes.

Then the Geats began to say that the dragon was the cause of the fires. Whether it was so, or no, Beowulf could not tell, though he suspected that certain malcontents were using arson as a means of disaffecting his people. He had to act, in either event, so he called a council. He told those assembled that there was a clear way out of their difficulties, and that he intended to take it.

'You grumbled at first because I did not use the gold which I brought back from Truda in Britain,' he said. 'I myself regretted having done so, I confess, because it occurred to me that Froda's gold has brought small luck to its possessors. That is why I resolved to have it buried in the earth, for the earth

to hold what the warriors might not. Death in battle has done away with all those connected with Froda's treasure, save only myself. But now you mutter among yourselves, saying that even though the gold is safely underground, it is guarded by a dragon who visits misfortunes upon us. There has been a pestilence, and there have been fires. We have sacrificed many cattle to the gods, in the hope that they would give us relief from our afflictions. That hope has been of no avail. Now my counsel is that we bide our time. Evil days do not last for ever. Death comes to all men, whether in battle, or from old age, or from sickness or accident. The events which menace us stem from making war. Long ago I saw that peace is better than war; but circumstances forced me away from peace and towards war again. Where are the war-makers? They sleep in death, and their names live after them in honour. That is a great thing, but I think not great enough. I have striven after a worthier aim, and now it seems to me that I must deny the whole lesson of my life, and throw this thing away because you demand it of me. Thus, if you reject my counsel, I will go to the dragon's barrow and take its wrath upon myself. I am getting old, but I am still strong, and I do not fear death anyway. If I die, I think it reasonable to suppose that the curse will be lifted by my death, and you will be enabled to enjoy the treasure in peace. Yet I think the wiser course would be to let the gold lie where it is, and see what fate brings.'

Only Vilaf spoke for the king, however; all the other nobles said that Beowulf ought to go to the barrow and open it, awaiting whatever fate met him there. They understood very little of his speech, which was no wonder: Beowulf was not an inward-looking man himself, and was giving utterance to thoughts which were only half-formed. He saw the rightness of peace, yet life had compelled him to war. He had to be brave in order to be generous, and he knew that in his world there was no room for the man of peace.

When Beowulf went to the gold-hoard, he took Vilaf and ten volunteers. He halted them on a hillock, and then made the customary formal speech of boasting, summing up the main triumphs of his life. Only Vilaf guessed that the king's bitter tone was not evidence of his anger at the dragon, but rather a deep self-contempt.

'I recall many a battle,' said the king, 'from my young days at Hygelac's board. And now I look at you in much the same way as an old man who sees his young son strung up on the gallows, bewailing the lad, so full of promise, who is now raven's meat. There can be no heir of his body to inherit his hall. His son's home is heartbreak to him, the seats are empty in the feasting hall, which is given over to the dreary winds. The harp sounds no longer, and there is no more joy.

'So, if I die, the Geat nation will be bereft of a leader, and a time of war must be expected as soon as the Frisians and the Franks learn of my death. They have good reason to hate us, ever since Hygelac sailed there years ago. The Swedes, too, may be expected to attack; ever since the days of Halfdane they have waited for a chance to destroy the Geats. I won renown at Ravenswood, and on the ice of Lake Vener I had great honour. Candidly, I do not give much for the chances of my people after I am gone. And now I am taking my sword to win the gold again for my people. Stay here until I call.'

And then Beowulf left them, making his way towards the barrow. As he reached the entrance, the nerve of the volunteers broke: they expected to see the monstrous form of the dragon emerge from the cave mouth and engulf the king before it raged towards them, so they ran away to the shelter of a wood, from which they could see nothing. Vilaf, however, stood his ground, and waited.

The barrow was hump-shaped, with an entrance made of rough-dressed stone slabs, one on each side and one acting as a lintel. Beowulf paused a moment on the threshold, breathing

hard, and then, muttering a prayer, he rushed in, with his sword ready to strike.

There was nothing there, nothing at all except the gold, glinting and winking in piles about him. Or was there? His heart was knocking, and he strove to keep a grip on his senses. His chest hurt. Was there a gleam from two red eyes, over there? He stabbed with his sword, and a cup, inlaid with rubies, rolled at his feet. He faltered, staggered; the walls of the barrow approached and receded in front of his bemused eyes, and a grinding roar began in his head. Froda's mill. He knew that his doom was upon him finally, and he flailed with his sword at the heaped gold, coughing a bloody froth. The harder metal of the sword Nailing bit into the gold, until the sword hit the stone wall and shattered; Beowulf was left with the hilt in his hand, yet he still swung at the gold. Then, gradually, his movements slowed, and he halted, groaning. He turned, and stumbled out of the barrow into the blinding light of the morning, missed his footing, fell, and rolled some way down the slope, his eyes closed and the roaring in his ears undiminished until he lost consciousness.

Vilaf ran to him, and turned him on his back. The king was still holding the hilt of the shattered sword, and the front of his mailshirt was all bedabbled with blood. Vilaf hurried to a stream which ran nearby, filled his helmet with water, and splashed Beowulf's face. His eyes opened, and he looked up into the young man's eyes, alight with worship. Then he knew that he had still a part to play.

'The dragon is gone,' he said, 'and my death is near. No, do not weep. If I had a son, I should wish now to give him my arms and armour; but you shall rule after me. Go and bring the treasure from the barrow, from out of the grey rocks, so that I may see it in daylight. I will rest here while you do this.'

Vilaf went and fetched the cowards from the wood, upbraiding them bitterly. They carried their shields in disgrace

to Beowulf, and wept to see him lying there. Vilaf told them that they had forfeited any claim to honour, and a life of shame was all that was left to them. Then they helped him in silence to bear the treasure on to the grass. They noticed that the gold was cut and scarred, and how blood drops glistened on the marred surfaces. Then Vilaf sent them away, and stood by the king until he opened his eyes again. He spoke with great difficulty, for his time was at hand.

‘I give thanks to the gods that I may look on these treasures with clear sight at last, and see gold for what it is. Well, I have gained it for my people: they can use it now without fear of harm, for I have bought this with my life. You must look after the Geats, Vilaf. Tell those famed in battle to raise a mound at the sea’s edge, splendid beside my pyre; it shall tower high on Whale’s Ness as a memorial to me by my people. Thenceforth the seafarers, as they travel far in ships over the waves’ darkness, will call it Beowulf’s Barrow. Do this for me.’

Then Beowulf took the gold collar from his neck, the collar which was Hygelac’s gift to him after Ravenswood, and gave it to Vilaf, together with his golden helmet and his mailshirt, and a ring from his finger, saying, ‘You are the last of our kin, the sole survivor of the Waymundings. Fate has swept all the rest away; now I must go along with them.’

And so he died.

*

Vilaf touched the torch to the pyre, and the flames shot up over Whale’s Ness, curling and licking about the weapons and armour with which the pyre was hung. Then the mourning Geats laid the body of the king on the flames; the dark wood-smoke swirled up, and the cries of the mourners mingled with the roar and crackle of the fire, till the body of the king was destroyed. The voices died away, until the only one left keening was that of an old woman, whose face was invisible through the smoke. It may have been an old nurse or tiring-

woman who remembered a small, weakly boy at Hathcyn's court.

Then the warriors prepared Beowulf's tumulus according to his instructions, so that it would be visible from the sea. It took them ten days to build the barrow. Into it, along with his ashes, they placed much of the treasure from Froda's gold-hoard - brooches, neck-rings and ornaments. Finally twelve chiefs, Vilaf among them, rode round the barrow in full armour, singing a last dirge in praise of Beowulf. They said that of all the kings in the world he was the mildest and kindest, the gentlest of men towards his people, and the most eager that he might deserve honour.

The songs of the old makers were scattered like a windblown handful of gulls wheeling apart from one another; and so Scandinavian skalds and Iceland sagamen tell only parts of this story, disagreeing among themselves, and with us. But our own tale is, perhaps, the oldest. It passed one day, possibly, on the tongue of a wandering scop to Northumbrian Aldfrid's court at Iona, crystallized (and christianized) there into Anglian by eager monks. Who knows but that, on its way south, the blessed Aldhelm himself, friend of Aldfrid as he was, did not sing it on his crossroads minstrelsy? After that southward journey, West Saxon overlays the Anglian; the words become fixed, held out to us through all the long centuries: one tattered manuscript, its edges eaten by fire, and more precious to us than all of old Froda's hoard.

Little is left still to tell. Danes are here yet, and Swedes; but the Geats vanish as the sea-fog of years rolls in over them. The scholars squabble, like the ravens over Hathcyn's eyes: were the Geats Jutes, Gautar, what? We do not know; but somewhere on the north Halland or south Bohuslän coast, it may be, a burial mound still humps dark on Whale's Ness, and over it those wanderer gulls still wheel and wail the immemorial elegy of man: Hū sēo þrāg gewāt, genāp under niht-helm, swā hē nō wāere; how that time has passed, vanished under the cover of night, as if it had never been.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Nomenclature

Names have been simplified as far as possible; the main consideration has been to avoid both incongruity to modern ears, and difficulty. For instance, the Old English *Frōda* has, for obvious reasons, been preferred to Icelandic *Fróthi*; but the Old English *Hrōthgār*, and the Old Norse *Hróthgeirr*, have been rejected in favour of Icelandic *Hróarr* (*Hroar*). *Rolf* (Old Norse *Hrólfr*) has been preferred to Old English *Hrōth(w)ulf*, and so on. Occasionally, as with *Frea* instead of Old English *Frēawaru*, and *Walthea*, from *Wealhthēow*, rather drastic changes have been made. But these, and the others, were felt to be justified in the interests of the general reader.

Sources

Though a full bibliography would be out of place in a work of this sort, some notes on sources may be useful. The most important for any attempt at a novel on Beowulf and his age must be the *Beowulf* MS. itself. The edition used for this book was that of Fr. Klaeber (Heath, 1950). I must, however, mention A. J. Wyatt's text in the edition of R. W. Chambers (Cambridge, 1914), which I used during my student days and remember with affection. An easily obtainable translation of *Beowulf*, in prose, and accurate enough for general purposes, will be found in the Everyman Library Edition of R. K. Gordon's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.^{*} Stella M. Mills's translation of *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki* (Oxford, 1933) contains a late sagaman's account of Oluf and Helgi (Halga), of Rolf's berserkers, his visit to Athils, and his encounter with Odin. Also noteworthy is O. Elton's *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus Translated* (London, 1894).

The following secondary authorities deserve special mention: H. M. Chadwick's *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912); R. W. Chambers's *Beowulf; an Introduction to the Study of the Poem* . . .

^{*}The Penguin Classics translation of *Beowulf*, a loose prose version by David Wright, unfortunately did not appear until this book was finished. It is highly recommended for the general reader.

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