Part 1

The Middle Ages

Chapter 1

The Anglo-Saxon Period (449–1066)

After the fall of the Roman Empire and the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain, the aboriginal Celtic population in the larger part of the island was soon conquered and almost totally exterminated by the Teutonic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes who came from the Continent and settled in the island, naming its central part Anglia, or England.

For nearly four hundred years prior to the coming of the English, Britain had been a Roman province. In 410 AD, the Romans withdrew their legions from Britain to protect Rome against swarms of Teutonic invaders. About 449 AD, a band of Teutons, called Jutes, left Denmark, landed on the Isle of Thanet. Warriors from the tribes of the Angles and the Saxons soon followed, and drove westward the original inhabitants.

Before the invasion of Britain, the Teutons inhabited the central part of Europe as far south as the Rhine, a tract which in a large measure coincided with modern Germany. The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons were different tribes of Teutons. These ancestors of the English dwelt in Denmark and in the lands extending southward along the North Sea.

The Angles, an important Teutonic tribe, furnished the name for the new home, which was called Angle-land, and afterward shortened into England. The language spoken by these tribes was generally called Anglo-Saxon or Saxon.

The literature of this period fell naturally into two divisions—pagan and Christian. The former represented the poetry which the Anglo-Saxons probably brought with them in the form of oral sagas, the crude material out of which literature was slowly developed on English soil; the latter represented

the writings developed under teaching of the monks. After the old pagan religion had vanished, it still retained its hold on the life and language of the people. In reading the earliest poetry of England it is well to remember that all of it was copied by the monks, and seems to have been more or less altered to give it a religious colouring.

The coming of Christianity meant not simply a new life for England, but also the wealth of a new language. The scop was replaced by the literary monks, and the monks, though living among common people and speaking with the English tongue, had behind them all the culture and literary resources of the Latin language. The effect was seen instantly in early English prose and poetry.

More voluminous are the survivals of the Christian poetry preserved in the monasteries. Among the early Anglo-Saxon poets we may mention Caedmon who lived in the latter half of the 7th century and wrote a poetic paraphrase of the Bible, and Cynewulf, the author of poems on religious subjects.

But the names of those who preserved and put down in written form the surviving pieces of old Anglo-Saxon poetry, have sunk into oblivion. And yet these unknown scribes probably deserve to occupy a higher place in the history of English literature than the two above-mentioned ecclesiastic poets. It was these unknown scribes that passed down to later generations the great epic *Beowulf* and such poems as *Widsith* or *The Traveller's Song*, and *The Seafarer*.

Beowulf[1]

Beowulf can be justly termed England's national epic and its hero Beowulf, one of the national heroes of the English people.

The only existing manuscript of *Beowulf* was written by an unknown scribe at the beginning of the 10th century. This epic was composed much earlier, and reflected events which took place on the Continent approximately at the beginning of the 6th century, when the forefathers of the Jutes lived in the southern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula and maintained close

relations with kindred tribes, eg with the Danes who lived on the other side of the straits.

The whole epic consists of 3,182 lines and is divided into two parts with an interpolation between the two. The whole song is essentially pagan in spirit and matter, while the interpolation is obviously an addition made by the Christian who copied *Beowulf*.

The Story

This poem describes the deeds of the Teutonic hero Beowulf. Hrothgar, the King of the Danes, built a magnificent mead hall to which he gave the name of Heorot. While the Danes were eating and drinking their fill in this famous hall, Grendel, a monster, came from the moor, burst in upon them, mangled thirty warriors, and then rushed off into the darkness. For twelve years this monster harried the warriors whenever they feasted in the hall, and even the bravest were afraid to enter it.

When Beowulf heard of this, he sailed with his warriors to Heorot, and persuaded the Danes to feast with him in the hall. After they had fallen asleep there, Grendel burst in the door, seized a warrior, and devoured him in a few mouthfuls. Then he grasped Beowulf. The hero, disdaining to use a sword against the dire monster, grappled with him, and together they wrestled up and down the hall. In their mad contest they overturned the tables and made the vast hall tremble as if it were in the throes of an earthquake.

Finally Beowulf, with a grip like that of thirty men, tore away the arm and shoulder of the monster, who rushed out to the marshes to die. The next night a banquet was given in Heorot in honour of the hero. After the feast, the warriors slept in the hall, but Beowulf went to the palace. He had been gone for a short time, when Grendel's mother rushed in to avenge the death of her son. She seized a warrior, the king's dearest friend, and carried him away.

Beowulf followed the bloody trail of Grendel's mother to the terrible flood. Undaunted by the dragons and serpents that made their home within the depths in the flood, he grasped a sword and plunged beneath the waves. He saw Grendel's mother, who came forward to meet him. She dragged him into her dwelling, where there was no water, and the fight began. The issue

was for a time doubtful, but at last Beowulf ran her through with a gigantic sword, and she fell dead upon the floor of her dwelling. A little distance away, he saw the dead body of Grendel. The hero cut off the heads of the monster and his mother and hastened away to Hrothgar's court. After receiving much praise and many presents, Beowulf sailed homeward with his warriors, where he ruled as the king for fifty years.

The closing part of the poem tells how one of Beowulf's subjects stole some of the treasure which a firedrake had been guarding in a cavern for three hundred years. The enraged monster with his fiery breath laid waste the land. Beowulf sought the dragon in his cavern and slew the monster after a terrible fight, but he was mortally wounded, and died after seeing in the cavern the heaps of treasure which he had won for his people. The dying hero was glad to learn that by his death he had gained more wealth for his people. He instructed Wiglaf, who was to succeed him, how to bury his body and how to rule the country after his death. His last words were full of care for the future of his land.

According to Beowulf's last will, the people of Jutland built a large bonfire on a headland which stretched far into the sea and cremated the hero's body. Then they laid all the treasures from the dragon's cave with Beowulf's ashes to show that the gold could in no way compensate for their great loss, and buried them under a tremendous mound. They piled the earth and stones so high that, in accordance with Beowulf's will, the mound thereafter became a beacon for the seafarers who sailed along the coast. Thus, even after his death, Beowulf continued to serve the people.

Mourning their dead champion, the people of Jutland composed a dirge praising the great deeds of Beowulf who

> of men was the mildest and most beloved,
> to his kin the kindest, keenest for praise.
> Then the Goth's people reared a mighty pile
> With shields and armour hung, as he had asked,
> And in the midst the warriors laid their lord,
> Lamenting. Then the warriors on the mound
> Kindled a mighty bale fire; the smoke rose

Black from the Swedish pine, the sound of flame.
Mingled with sound of weeping;…while smoke
Spreads over heaven. Then upon the hill
High, broad, and to be seen far out at sea.
In ten days they had built and walled in it
As the wise thought most worthy, placed in it
Rings, jewels, other treasures from the hoard.
They left the riches, golden joy of earls,
In dust, for earth to hold, where yet it lies,
Useless as ever. Then about the mound
The warriors rode, and raised a mournful song
For their dead king, exalted his brave deeds,
Holding it fit men honour their liege lord,
Praise him and love him when his soul is fled.
Thus the (Geats) people, sharers of his hearth,
Mourned their chief's fall, praised him of kings, of men
The mildest and the kindest, and to all
His people gentlest, yearning for their praise.

(Morley's version)

Prologue: The Earlier History of the Danes

Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes, kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing[2] took mead-benches away from enemy bands, from many tribes, terrified their nobles—after the time that he was first found helpless[3]. He lived to find comfort for that, became great under the skies, prospered in honours until every one of those who lived about him, across the whale-road, had to obey him, pay him tribute. That was a good king.

Afterwards a son was born to him, a young boy in his house, whom God sent to comfort the people: He had seen the sore need they had suffered during the long time they lacked a king. Therefore the Lord of Life, the Ruler of Heaven, gave him honour in the world, Beow[4] was famous, the glory of the son of Scyld spread widely in the Northlands. In this way a young man ought

by his good deeds, by giving splendid gifts while still in his father's house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes. Through deeds that bring praise, a man shall prosper in every country.

Then at the fated time Scyld the courageous went away into the protection of the Lord. His dear companions carried him down to the sea-currents, just as he himself had bidden them do when, as protector of the Scyldings[5], he had ruled them with his words—long had the beloved prince governed the land. There in the harbour stood the ring-prowed ship, ice-covered and ready to sail, a prince's vessel. Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, the ring-giver, in the hollow of the ship, the glorious man beside the mast. There was bought great store of treasure, wealth from lands far away. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him far out into the sea's possession. They provided him with no lesser gifts, treasure of the people, than those had done who at his beginning first sent him forth on the waves, a child alone. Then also they set a golden standard high over his head, let the water take him, gave him to the sea. Sad was their spirit, mournful their mind. Men cannot truthfully say who received that cargo, neither counsellors in the hall nor warriors under the skies.

(I) Then in the cities was Beow of the Scyldings beloved king of the people, long famous among nations (his father had gone elsewhere, the king from his land), until later great Healfdene was born to him. As long as he lived, old and fierce in battle, he upheld the glorious Scyldings. To him all told were four children born into the world, to the leader of the armies: Heorogar and Hrothgar and the good Halga. I have heard tell that (…) was Onela's queen,[6] beloved bed-companion of the Battle-Scylfing.

Beowulf and Grendel

The Hall Heorot Is Attacked by Grendel

Then Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle, so that his retainers gladly obeyed him and their company grew into a great band of

warriors. It came to his mind that he would command men to construct a hall, a great mead-building that the children of men should hear of forever, and therein he would give to young and old all that God had given him, except for common land and men's bodies[7]. Then I have heard that the work was laid upon many nations, wide through this middle-earth, that they should adorn the folk-hall. In time it came to pass—quickly, as men count it—that it was finished, the largest of hall-dwellings. He gave it the name of Heorot[8], he who ruled wide with his words. He did not forget his promise; at the feast he gave out rings, treasure. The hall stood tall, high and wide-gabled, it would wait for the fierce flames of vengeful fire[9]; the time was not yet at hand for sword-hate between son-in-law and father-in-law to awaken after murderous rage.

Then the fierce spirit[10] painfully endured hardship for a time, he who dwelt in the darkness, for every day he heard loud mirth in the hall; there was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the scop[11]. There he spoke who could relate the beginning of men far back in time, said that the Almighty made earth, a bright field fair in the water that surrounds it, set up in triumph the lights of the sun and the moon to lighten land-dwellers, and adorned the surfaces of the earth with branches and leaves, created also life for each of the kinds that move and breathe.—Thus these warriors lived in joy, blessed, until one began to do evil deeds, a hellish enemy. The grim spirit was called Grendel, known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness. Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain. The Eternal Lord avenged the murder in which he slew Abel. Cain had no pleasure in that feud, but He banished him far from mankind, the Ruler, for that misdeed. From him sprang all bad breeds, trolls and elves and monsters—likewise the giants who for a long time strove with God; He paid them their reward for that.

(II) Then, after night came, Grendel went to survey the tall house—how, after their beer-drinking, the Ring-Danes had disposed themselves in it. Then he found therein a band of nobles asleep after the feast; they felt no sorrow, no misery of men. The creature of evil, grim and fierce, was quickly ready, savage and cruel, and seized from their rest thirty thanes. From there he turned to go back to his home, proud of his plunder, sought his dwelling with that store

of slaughter.

Then in the first light of dawning day Grendel's war-strength was revealed to men; then after the feast weeping arose, great cry in the morning. The famous king, hero of old days, sat joyless; the mighty one suffered, felt sorrow for his thanes, when they saw the track of the foe, of the cursed spirit; that hardship was too strong, too loathsome and long-lasting. Nor was there a longer interval, but after one night Grendel again did greater slaughter—and had no remorse for it—vengeful acts and wicked he was too intent on them. Thereafter it was easy to find the man who sought rest for himself elsewhere, farther away, a bed among the outlying buildings—after it was made clear to him[12], told by clear proof the hatred of him who now controlled the hall. Whoever escaped the foe held himself afterwards farther off and more safely. Thus Grendel held sway and fought against right, one against all, until the best of houses stood empty. It was a long time, the length of twelve winters, that the lord of the Scyldings suffered grief, all woes, great sorrows. Therefore, sadly in songs, it became well-known to the children of men that Grendel had fought a long time with Hrothgar, for many half-years maintained mortal spite, feud, and enmity—constant war. He wanted no peace with any of the men of the Danish host, would not withdraw his deadly rancour, or pay compensation; no counsellor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer[13]. For the monster was relentless, the dark death-shadow, against warriors old and young, lay in wait and ambushed them. In the perpetual darkness he held to the misty moors, men do not know where hell-demons direct their footsteps.

Thus many crimes the enemy of mankind committed, the terrible walker-alone, cruel injuries one after another. In the dark nights he dwelt in Heorot, the richly adorned hall. He might not approach the throne, (receive) treasure, because of the Lord; He had no love for him.[14]

This was great misery to the lord of the Scyldings, a breaking of spirit. Many a noble sat often in council, sought a plan, what would be best for strong-hearted men to do against the awful attacks. At times they vowed sacrifices at heathen temples, with their words prayed that the soul-slayer[15] would give help for the distress of the people. Such was their custom, the hope

of heathens; in their spirits they thought of Hell, they knew not the Ruler, the Judge of Deeds, they recognised not the Lord God, nor indeed did they know how to praise the Protector of Heaven, the glorious King. Woe is him who in terrible trouble must thrust his soul into the fire's embrace, hope for no comfort, not expect change. Well is the man who after his death-day may seek the Lord and find peace in the embrace of the Father.

The Fight with Grendel

(X) Then Hrothgar went out of the hall with his company of warriors, the protector of the Scyldings. The war chief would seek the bed of Wealhtheow the queen. The King of Glory—as men had learned—had appointed a hall-guard against Grendel; he had a special mission to the prince of the Danes: he kept watch against monsters.

And the man of the Geats had sure trust in his great might, the favour of the Ruler. Then he took off his shirt of armour, the helmet from his head, handed his embellished sword, best of irons, to an attendant, bade him keep guard over his war-gear. Then the good warrior spoke some boast-words before he went to his bed, Beowulf of the Geats: "I claim myself no poorer in war-strength, war works, than Grendel claims himself. Therefore I will not put him to sleep with a sword, so take away his life, though surely I might. He knows no good tools with which he might strike against me, cut my shield in pieces, though he is strong in fight. But we shall forgo the sword in the night—if he dare seek war without weapon—and then may wise God, Holy Lord, assign glory on whichever hand seems good to Him."

The battle brave one laid himself down, the pillow received the earl's head, and about him many a brave seaman lay down to hall—rest. None of them thought that he would ever again seek from there his dear home, people or town where he had been brought up; for they knew that bloody death had carried off far too many men in the wine-hall, folk of the Danes. But the Lord granted to weave for them good fortune in war, for the folk of the Weather-Geats, comfort and help that they should quite overcome their foe through the might of one man, through his sole strength: the truth has been made known that mighty God has always ruled mankind.

There came gliding in the black night the walker in darkness. The warriors slept who should hold the horned house—all but one. It was known to men that when the Ruler did not wish it the hostile creature might not drag them away beneath the shadows. But he, lying awake for the fierce foe, with heart swollen in anger awaited the outcome of the fight.

(XI) Then from the moor under the mist-hills Grendel came walking, wearing God's anger. The foul ravager thought to catch some one of mankind there in the high hall. Under the clouds he moved until he could see most clearly the wine-hall, treasure-house of men, shining with gold. That was not the first time that he had sought Hrothgar's home. Never before or since in his life-days did he find harder luck, hardier hall-thanes. The creature deprived of joy came walking to the hall. Quickly the door gave way, fastened with fire-forged bands, when he touched it with his hands. Driven by evil desire, swollen with rage, he tore it open, the hall's mouth. After that the foe at once stepped onto the shining floor, advanced angrily. From his eyes came a light not fair, most like a flame. He saw many men in the hall, a band of kinsmen all asleep together, a company of warmen. Then his heart laughed: dreadful monster, he thought that before the day came he would divide the life from the body of every one of them, for there had come to him a hope of fullfeasting. It was not his fate that when that night was over he should feast on more of mankind.

The Kinsman of Hygelac, mighty man, watched how the evil-doer would make his quick onslaught. Nor did the monster mean to delay it, but, starting his work, he suddenly seized a sleeping man, tore at him ravenously, bit into his bone locks, drank the blood from his veins, swallowed huge morsels; quickly he had eaten all of the lifeless one, feet and hands. He stepped closer, then felt with his arm for the brave-hearted man on the bed, reached out towards him, the foe with his hand; at once in fierce response Beowulf seized it and sat up, leaning on his own arm. Straightway the fosterer of crimes knew that he had not encountered on middle-earth, anywhere in this world, a harder hand-grip from another man. In mind he became frightened, in his spirit: not for that might he escape the sooner. His heart was eager to get away, he would flee to his hiding-place, seek his rabble of devils. What he met

there was not such as he had ever before met in the days of his life. Then the Kinsman of Hygelac, the good man, thought of his evening's speech, stood upright and laid firm hold on him: his fingers cracked. The giant was pulling away, the earl stepped foward. The notorious one thought to move farther away, wherever he could, and flee his way from here to his fen-retreat: he knew his fingers' power to be in a hateful grip. That was a painful journey that the loathsome despoiler had made to Heorot. The retainers' hall rang with the noise—terrible drink[16] for all the Danes, the housedwellers, every brave man, the earls. Both were enraged, fury filled, the two who meant to control the hall. The building resounded. Then was it much wonder that the wine-hall withstood them joined in fierce fight, that it did not fall to the ground, the fair earth-dwelling; but it was so firmly made fast with iron bands, both inside and outside, joined by skillful smith-craft. There started from the floor—as I have heard say—many a mead bench, gold-adorned, when the furious ones fought. No wise men of the Scyldings ever before thought that any men in any manner might break it down, splendid with bright horns, have skill to destroy it, unless flame should embrace it, swallow it in fire. Noise rose up, sound strange enough. Horrible fear came upon the North-Danes, upon every one of those who heard the weeping from the wall, God's enemy sing his terrible song, song without triumph—the hell-slave bewail his pain. There held him fast he who of men was strongest of might in the days of this life.

(XII) Not for anything would the protector of warriors let the murderous guest go off alive. He did not consider his lifedays of use to any of the nations. There more than enough of Beowulf's earls drew swords, old heirlooms, wished to protect the life of their dear lord, famous prince, however they might. They did not know when they entered the fight, hardy-spirited warriors, and when they thought to hew him on every side, to seek his soul, that not any of the best of irons on earth, no war sword, would touch the evil-doer; for with a charm he had made victory-weapons useless, every sword-edge. His departure to death from the time of this life was to be wretched; and the alien spirit was to travel far off into the power of fiends. Then he who before had brought trouble of heart to mankind, committed many crimes—he was at war with God—found that his body would do him no

good, for the great-hearted kinsman of Hygelac had him by the hand. Each was hateful to the other alive. The awful monster had lived to feel pain in his body, a huge wound in his shoulder was exposed, his sinews sprang apart, his bonelocks broke. Glory in battle was given to Beowulf. Grendel must flee from there, mortally sick, seek his joyless home in the fen-slopes. He knew the more surely that his life's end had come, the full number of his days. For all the Danes was their wish fulfilled after the bloody fight. Thus he who had lately come from far off, wish and stout-hearted, had purged Heorot, saved Hrothgar's house from affliction. He rejoiced in his night's work, a deed to make famous his courage. The man of the Geats had fulfilled his boast to the East-Danes; so too he had remedied all the grief, the malice-caused sorrow that they had endured before, and had to suffer from harsh necessity, no small distress. That was clearly proved when the battle brave man set the hand up under the curved roof—the arm and the shoulder: There all together was Grendel's grasp.

Notes

1. The translation into modern English is based on Friedrich Klaeber's third edition of the poem (1950).
2. Scyld Scefing: The meaning is probably "son of Sceaf", although Scyld's origins are mysterious.
3. after the time that he was first found helpless: As is made clear shortly below, Scyld arrived in Denmark as a child alone in a ship loaded with treasures.
4. Beow: Although the manuscript reads "Beowulf", most scholars now agree that it should read "Beow". Beow was the grandfather of the Danish king Hrothgar.
5. Scyldings: the Danes (descendants of Scyld)
6. The text is faulty, so that the name of Healfdene's daughter has been lost; her husband Onela was a Swedish king.
7. men's bodies: men's lives. Apparently slaves, along with public land, were not in the king's power to give away.

8. Heorot: Hart
9. the fierce flames of vengeful fire: The destruction by fire of Heorot occurred at a later time than that of the poem's action, probably during the otherwise unsuccessful attack of the Heatho Bard Ingeld on his father-in-law Hrothgar, mentioned in the next clause.
10. the firece spirit: Grendel
11. scop: The "scop" was the Anglo-Saxon minstrel, who recited poetic stories to the accompaniment of a harp.
12. him: Grendel
13. expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer: According to old Germanic law, a slayer could achieve peace with his victim's kinsmen only by paying them wergild, i.e. compensation for the life of the slain man.
14. Behind this obscure passage seems to lie the idea that Grendel, unlike Hrothgar's thanes, could not approach the throne to receive gifts from the king, having been condemned by God as an outlaw.
15. the soul-slayer: The Devil. Despite this assertion that the Danes were heathen, their king, Hrothgar, speaks consistently as a Christian.
16. The retainers' hall rang with the noise—terrible drink: The metaphor reflects the idea that the chief purpose of a hall such as Heorot was a place for men to feast in.

Chapter 2

The Anglo-Norman Period (1066–1350)

In the year 1066, at the battle of Hastings, the Normans headed by William, Duke of Normandy, defeated the Anglo-Saxons.

The Normans were originally a hardy race of sea rovers inhabiting Scandinavia. In the 10th century they conquered a part of northern France, which is still called Normandy, and rapidly adopted French civilisation and the French language. Their conquest of Anglo-Saxon England under William, Duke of Normandy, began with the battle of Hastings in 1066. The three chief effects of the conquest were: the bringing of Roman civilisation to England; the growth of nationality, i.e. a strong centralised government, instead of the loose union of Saxon tribes; the new language and literature, which were proclaimed in Chaucer.

The literature which they brought to England was remarkable for its bright, romantic tales of love and adventure, in marked contrast with the strength and somberness of Anglo-Saxon poetry. During the following three centuries Anglo-Saxon speech simplified itself by dropping off its Teutonic inflections, absorbed eventually a large part of the French vocabulary, and became the English language. English literature is also a combination of French and Anglo-Saxon elements.

The literature of this period includes: Geoffrey's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which is valuable as a source book of literature, since it contains the native Celtic legends of Arthur; the work of the French writers, who made the Arthurian legends popular; rhyming chronicles, i.e. history in doggerel verse, like Layamon's *Brut*; metrical romances, or tales in verse. In terms of matters there are mainly three classes: the matter of France, tales about Charlemagne