

was full of ancient treasure in rings and vases and golden ornaments, which he had secretly stolen during a space of three hundred years. Folk missed their gold and jewels but knew not who the robber was, until one night a way-farer by chance wandered into the cave and saw the precious hoard and the dragon slumbering by it, and snatched a golden drinking cup, from the glittering heap and fled. Hot burned the dragon's anger when, awaking, he missed the gold drinking cup, and saw that his secret treasure-hoard was known to men. He rose upon his flaming wings each night and sped to and fro seeking the man who had done him this evil; and where he went he consumed houses and people and scorched the land into a wilderness. The waves of fire reached the palace and destroyed that best of buildings, the fastness of the Geáts, and the people trembled for fear of the terrible flyer of the air.—Dark thoughts came into Beowulf's mind, inso-much that he was even angry with the Almighty because of the plague which visited the people, and in his bitterness he spake hard things against the Eternal Lord such as befitted him not. Then he commanded to make a variegated shield of iron, strong and well-tempered, to withstand the fire-breath of the adversary, and having put on his war-nail, he called together his warriors and said, 'Many a battle, O my comrades, have I dared from my youth up; many a warrior's soul have I loosed from its shattered house of bone with my biting war-bill. Now for the greater glory of my age will I seek this flaming war-fly alone. Be it yours to abide afar off on the hill and watch the combat, but take no part therein. The glory and the treasure and the war are mine alone. Would I might proudly grapple with nothing but my naked hands against this wretch, as of old I did with Grendel! But since the war-fire is so fierce and poisonous, I take my shield and byrnie and my sword. Not a foot-step will I flee till fate make up her reckoning betwixt us.'

Then arose the famous warrior, stoutly trusting in his strength, and came to the hoary stone cliff whence waves of fire flowed like a rushing mountain torrent. Boldly and with angry words the lord of the Geáts defied the fire-drake to come out and face the thirsty steel of Nagling, his sharp-edged blade.

Quickly the winged worm answered to his

challenge. Bending itself together for the contest, and darting furious flames, it closed in battle with the haughty warrior; and they who beheld afar off saw nothing but the fire which wrapped the fighters round. The good shield guarded Beowulf's body less truly than he had hoped from the beams of fire. Nagling, the hard-edged, bit less strongly than the champion, who knew so well to swing the war-bill, had need in his extremity: the keen sword deceived him as a blade of such old goodness ought not to have done. The fierce treasure-keeper, boiling with fury, flooded the plain in a sea of fire, so that the nobles which watched the combat turned and fled to the wood for safety. All turned and fled save one. Wigláf, son of Weohstán, a dear shield-warrior, only kinsman of Beowulf, saw his lord suffer in the bitter strife, and his heart could no longer refrain. He seized his shield of yellow linden-wood, and his old tried sword. 'Comrades,' he cried, 'forget ye all the gifts of rings and treasure we have received from Beowulf's hands at the daily out-pouring of the mead? Forget ye his past benefits and his present need?' Then he ran through the deadly smoke and the clinging fire to succour his dear lord. The flame burnt up his linden shield, but Wigláf ran boldly underneath the shield of his master and fought at his side. Then Beowulf, jealous for his single fame, though heat-oppressed and wearied, swung his great war-sword and drave it down mightily upon the head of the fire-drake. But Nagling failed him, and brake in sunder with the blow; for Beowulf's hand was too strong and overpowered every sword-blade forged by mortal man, neither was it granted to him at any time that the edges of the smith's iron might avail him in war. Wildly he spurned the treacherous sword-hilt from him, and furious rushed upon the fiery worm and clutched it by the neck in the terrible gripe of his naked hands. There upon the plain he throttled it, while the burning life-blood of the fire-drake boiled up from its throat and set his hands aflame. Yet loosened he never his gripe, but held the twining worm till Wigláf carved its body in twain with his sword. Then Beowulf flung the carcass to the earth and the fire ceased.

But the fiery blood was on his hands; and they began to burn and swell; and he felt the poison course through all his veins and boil up