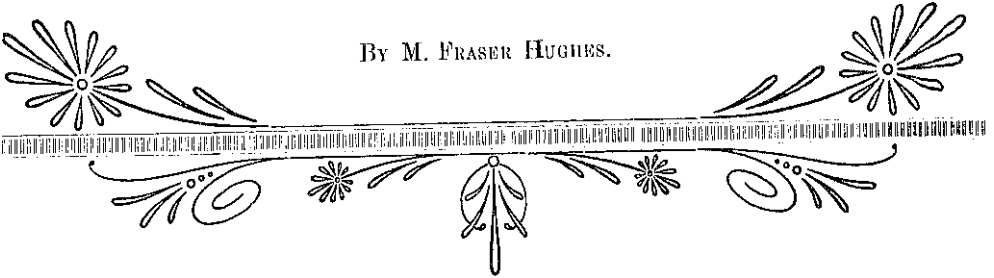


# AN OLD WAR SONG.

By M. FRASER HUGHES.



**T**HERE is no hero but Tommy, and Kipling is his poet. So be it. We are all quite prepared to do our part in worshipping the risen sun. But, by reason of his very brightness, the object of our devotion is apt to cause a faintness by the way, a longing for something less dazzling and—dare we say?—a trifle less vulgar. Let us seek then the cool bye-paths of literature, and, since the stress of our times has decreed that strife shall be the sole occupant of our thoughts and books, let us see if we cannot find some grove which, though resounding with martial strains, is yet hallowed by the reverence of many generations.

Long ago, before William the Conqueror was dreamt of, the pleasantest part of England for a scholar to live in was Northumbria, with its wild coasts and angry sea. There, as a rule, he lived in peace in some monastery, translating and transcribing the works of the fathers. But at times his quiet was rudely broken by the wild visits of the Northmen, who, descending on the coasts, carried off from the houses of learning such treasures as they could lay their hands on. Rude and barbarous as these Scandinavian tribes were, they had yet some form of intellectual amusement in the stirring tales of their heroes and warriors, which they chanted to one another as they lay round their wood fires when the toils of the day were over. Of such tales the best known to us is that of

"Beowulf." Perchance some Northman, more peaceably inclined than his fellows, settled on the Northumbrian shores and told the tale to his neighbours; perchance some captive heard the story sung by his conquerors over their mead; we know not how, but certain it is that this outland story was written down in our tongue, and became part of our literature. It is a matter of dispute as to when it assumed its present form, perhaps as early as the eighth century, but there is no doubt that the story itself is older even than that. It is written in the Wessex dialect of the Anglo-Saxon language, but as we know, it first came to Northumbria. This leads us to believe that the version we have is merely a transcript of an old Northumbrian one.

The song sets forth the mighty deeds of one Beowulf, and runs somewhat thus: In a sea-bound kingdom there lived a king called Hrothgar, who, with his thanes, might have lived happily save that his land was infested by a terrible monster called the *grendel*. Every night when, weary with the mead drinking, the thanes lay asleep, the awful *grendel* entered and, seizing one of them, devoured him as he lay.

Adjoining Hrothgar's kingdom was a fair realm ruled over by a king who had one son named Boewulf. When the young prince heard of the ravages of the *grendel* he resolved to rid the unhappy land of such a torment. He came to Hrothgar, who gladly