



The Red Book of Heroes

Mrs. Andrew Lang

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'Life is not all beer and skittles,' said a reflective sportsman, and all books are not fairy tales. In an imperfect state of existence, 'the peety of it is that we cannot have all things as we would like them.' Undeniably we would like all books to be fairy tales or novels, and at present most of them are. But there is another side to things, and we must face it. "'Life is real, life is earnest," as Tennyson tells us,' said an orator to whom I listened lately, and though Longfellow, not Tennyson, wrote the famous line quoted by the earnest speaker, yet there is a good deal of truth in it. The word 'earnest,' like many other good words, has been overdone. It is common to sneer at 'earnest workers,' yet where would we be without them, especially in our climate? In a Polynesian island, where the skies for ever smile, and the blacks for ever dance, earnestness is superfluous. The bread-fruit tree delivers its rolls punctually every morning, strawberries or other fruits, as nice, spring beneath the feet of the dancers; the cavern in the forest provides a roof and shelter from the sun; the sea supplies a swimming-bath, and man, in time of peace, has only to enjoy himself, eat and drink, laugh and love, sing songs and tell fairy tales. His drapery is woven of fragrant flowers, nobody is poor and anxious about food, nobody is rich and afraid of losing his money, nobody needs to think of helping others; he has only to put forth his hand, or draw his bow or swing his fishing-rod, and help himself. To be sure, in time of war, man has just got to be earnest, and think out plans for catching and spearing his enemies, and drill his troops and improve his weapons, in fact to do some work, or have his throat cut, and be put in the oven and eaten. Thus it is really hard for the most fortunate people to avoid being earnest now and then.

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