



English Literature for Boys and Girls

H. E. Marshall

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EXCERPT:

HAS there ever been a time when no stories were told? Has there ever been a people who did not care to listen? I think not.

When we were little, before we could read for ourselves, did we not gather eagerly round father or mother, friend or nurse, at the promise of a story? When we grew older, what happy hours did we not spend with our books. How the printed words made us forget the world in which we live, and carried us away to a wonderland,

"Where waters gushed and fruit trees grew
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new;
The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,
And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
And honey bees had lost their stings,
And horses were born with eagles' wings."*

*Robert Browning.

And as it is with us, so it is with a nation, with a people.

In the dim, far-off times when our forefathers were wild, naked savages, they had no books. Like ourselves, when we were tiny, they could neither read nor write. But do you think that they had no stories? Oh, yes! We may be sure that when the day's work was done, when the fight or the chase was over, they gathered round the wood fire and listened to the tales of the story-teller.

These stories were all of war. They told of terrible combats with men or with fierce strange beasts, they told of passion, of revenge. In them there was no beauty, no tenderness, no love. For the life of man in those far-off days was wild and rough; it was one long struggle against foes, a struggle which left little room for what was beautiful or tender.

But as time went on, as life became more easy, in one way or another the savage learned to become less savage. Then as he changed, the tales he listened to changed too. They were no longer all of war, of revenge; they told of love also. And later, when the story of Christ had come to soften men's hearts and brighten men's lives, the stories told of faith and purity and gentleness.

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