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A Man Who Knew Happiness

THE death of W. Downie Stewart was announced while last week's issue of *The Listener* was being printed. We must therefore refer to the event later than we would have wished, though this may be one case where the lapse of time is unimportant. Downie Stewart was not the sort of person who needed only a prompt and formal tribute. His character will be as interesting in years to come as it is today: he will stay in the minds of people who knew him, and when they think of him they will find themselves asking questions which touch upon the mysteries of human behaviour. For Downie Stewart, paralysed for many years to the point of almost total helplessness, was a happy man. Perhaps he was gifted in the first place with fortunate attributes. It is probably true that he always liked people, that from his early years he was what, in his own words, he remained to the end—"a hero-worshipper," and that he had a natural vision of the good in men which made him unable or unwilling to look too closely at their weaknesses. But these attributes, which might have seemed merely the graces of a liberal character in a busy and successful man, became something purer and stronger in one who, taken by illness from a distinguished career in politics, had to find his world largely in an invalid's chair. It is true that the outside world came to him, gladly and respectfully. There can be few New Zealanders, now eminent in affairs of the arts, who did not visit the house in Heriot Row; and if sometimes they went uncertainly, not sure of what they would find in a man cut off from normal activity, they must have gone back thoughtfully into the streets of Dunedin. A man who has wrestled long with illness may be forgiven if some trace of bitterness creeps into his view of life. But Downie Stewart was incapable of bitterness. His mind remained alert, eager for refreshment and new expression. He

wrote industriously while his health permitted; but his books, in spite of their historical value, did not reveal the personal quality which filled his conversation. A legal training has penalties as well as advantages; and the lawyer who turns to the writing of biography may find it harder than most authors to commit himself to final opinions. Moreover, he liked men so much, and was always so eager to see the best of them, that his portraits sometimes lacked the penetration which takes the truth from a setting of shadow. He could not think ill of his fellows. There was something romantic in his temperament, and it ran through him in a vein of goodness. If he had written novels, he would have been a John Buchan of the Antipodes, concerned with honest virtues and simple courage. His career in politics and letters has been described fully in the newspapers, and there is no need to enlarge upon it here. Yet two features of that career must be noticed before we can hope to see him in the round. He was a politician of an older school in that, although he had his special field, he worked in it among broad interests taken from a liberal culture. And his principles were so much a part of him that he could resign from office rather than act against them. He was completely honest. Lesser men went to see him, not merely because they respected his judgment and were glad to draw upon his wide knowledge of affairs, but also because they felt better for speaking to him. That clear mind, undimmed by illness, was the mind of a man who, in the midst of affliction, could retain an underlying serenity. He had the gift of happiness, so that although he was always interested in ideas he did not need them for reassurance. To have talked with Downie Stewart was an experience, humbling and renewing, which will not be forgotten now that there is silence in Heriot Row.

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