

**ROBERT LOUIS
STEVENSON**

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Robert Louis Stevenson by W. Robertson Nicoll & G. K. Chesterton

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BY

G. K. Chesterton

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The Characteristics of Robert Louis Stevenson

ALL things and all men are underrated, much by others, especially by themselves; and men grow tired of men just as they do of green grass, so that they have to seek for green carnations. All great men possess in themselves the qualities which will certainly lay them open to censure and diminishment; but these inevitable deficiencies in the greatness of great men vary in the widest degree of variety. Stevenson is open to a particularly subtle, a particularly effective and a particularly unjust disparagement. The advantage of great men like Blake or Browning or Walt Whitman is that they did

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not observe the niceties of technical literature. The far greater disadvantage of Stevenson is that he did. Because he had a conscience about small matters in art, he is conceived not to have had an imagination about big ones. It is assumed by some that he must have been a bad architect, and the only reason that they can assign is that he was a good workman. The mistake which has given rise to this conception is one that has much to answer for in numerous departments of modern art, literature, religion, philosophy, and politics. The supreme and splendid characteristic of Stevenson was his levity; and his levity was the flower of a hundred grave philosophies. The strong man is always light: the weak man is always heavy. A swift and casual agility is the mark of bodily strength: a humane levity is the mark of spiritual strength. A thoroughly strong man swinging a sledge-hammer can tap the top of an eggshell. A weaker

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man swinging a sledge-hammer will break the table on which it stands into pieces. Also, if he is a very weak man, he will be proud of having broken the table, and call himself a strong man dowered with the destructive power of an Imperial race.

This is, superficially speaking, the peculiar interest of Stevenson. He had what may be called a perfect mental athleticism, which enabled him to leap from crag to crag, and to trust himself anywhere and upon any question. His splendid quality as an essayist and controversialist was that he could always recover his weapon. He was not like the average swashbuckler of the current parties, tugged at the tail of his own sword. This is what tends, for example, to make him stand out so well beside his unhappy friend Mr. Henley, whose true and unquestionable affection has lately taken so bitter and feminine a form. Mr. Henley, an admirable poet and critic, is, nevertheless, the man *par excellence*

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who breaks the table instead of tapping the egg. In his recent article on Stevenson he entirely misses this peculiar and supreme point about his subject.

He there indulged in a very emotional remonstrance against the reverence almost universally paid to the physical misfortunes of his celebrated friend. "If Stevenson was a stricken man," he said, "are we not all stricken men?" And he proceeded to call up the images of the poor and sick, and of their stoicism under their misfortunes. If sentimentalism be definable as the permitting of an emotional movement to cloud a clear intellectual distinction, this most assuredly is sentimentalism, for it would be impossible more completely to misunderstand the real nature of the cult of the courage of Stevenson. The reason that Stevenson has been selected out of the whole suffering humanity as the type of this more modern and occult martyrdom is a very simple one. It is not