

ABOUT WALKING.

By "VASS."

SOME disillusioned person pronounced snuff-taking the only human pleasure immediate and reliable in giving results. Yet no beneficial result appears beyond a violent change in the contents of the lungs, and it is but a fleeting, passive pleasure. Active pleasures give more deep and lasting satisfaction and, of these, walking can stimulate you physically and mentally better than rule-bound pastimes like golf. It can, but whether it does or not depends on several things.

You should have, or cultivate, a philosophy of intelligent walking, a realisation of the what and the how. Just consider two rather extreme types of walkers. Here come a couple of kilted, dyed-in-the-wool hikers bundling along in the hot sun, under bulging rucksacks, at a grim 4 m.p.h. with their eyes on the path four steps ahead. The record breakers and not so rare either! "Yes, yes, we've been to X. We've been to Y and Z, and most places you can mention." And there go the farmer and his neighbour lurching ponderously through their traditional Sunday field inspection. From time to time, after due gestation, are born observations like, "Aye, man, they dawmed craws ken fine ye manna shoot on the Sabbath." Perhaps you will agree that intelligent walking lies in a more balanced mixture of athletic leg moving and curiosity in the things not too far removed from the point of the nose.

Not that there is anything wrong in being interested in things, however trivial, in your near horizon. Far from it. It is healthy to give free rein occasionally to the born gaper—the rubberneck—in us, to look over the bridge parapet for trout, to read that moss-covered plaque, to find that curlew's nest. Let us be curious about the design of the war memorial, about the difference between the north and the south side



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LOCH MUICK

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of the valley. And now and again we may well make little incidents. The small-boyish delight of trundling boulders into a loch! And why miss the chance of speaking to lone people like gamekeepers, shepherds, and anglers? In the latter there is generally a philosophic streak, and in all an acute eye for bird and fish, beast, plant, and weather. For example, one shepherd holds that hill sheep have their favourite howf for lounging, like street-corner boys in a city, and he can tell you in advance that a certain hollow will contain exactly twenty-five sheep.

Of course, if you indulge in such unpredictable ploys, what is going to happen to your neatly worked-out programme? Just so. In view of the normal, clock-driven routine of most of us, why trouble to have more than an outline, subject to alterations without notice—even steamship companies are not above that. You have done enough planning if you decide to pass through this village, take another photograph of that loch, ascertain if the *Cross Keys* (or whatever the hostelry) still has those cork marks on the ceiling. But have some objective, a peg on which to hang your interests and, if one does not readily occur to you, you have the unfailing inspiration of the O.S. map. The writer found his eye straying along a long straight line composed of road, track, and path, broken here and there—a Roman road that was. He felt he must follow some miles of it, and one day he did, engrossed. Although a compass was needed at times to hold to the way in field and wood, a climb on to a nearby hill showed it ever thrusting straight into the horizon. Of Roman remains there were none, yet, in places where the way was sunken, his youthful mind constrained him to poke hopefully in the bank in search of a possible classical trouser button. Equally engrossing are the eighteenth-century military roads and the devious drove roads which converged on Falkirk.

Perhaps you disagree with such sketchiness in walk programmes, but you will surely agree that every walker should have evolved for himself a methodical style of walking, which will drive him along as smoothly and effortlessly as possible. City streets generally produce a short clip-clop

step, with much bending of the knee, a step with an infectious rhythm, the step of the marching song. But it is just a road step, and once off roads and smooth ground you flounder. Perhaps the best model for a cross-country step would be that of the hill shepherd—a long, unhurried, swinging stride with leg fairly straight and a strong ankle thrust, the “heather lowp.” No similarity here to the spurious smartness of the gymnasium walk, yet this walk has its solid sturdy beauty, and is certainly effective. But how many town-bred hip-and-ankle walkers lift their 10 or 12 stones vertically an unnecessary half-inch at each step!

Thinking of the hill shepherd, you picture him with his staff. Can you picture him with a walking-stick? That traditional adjunct of the walker is useful for stabbing into rabbit holes, throwing into the river for the dog to retrieve, and even for going uphill—but how much use is it for crossing a burn, testing the firmness of peat bog, going downhill, or traversing a steep hill-side as you do in following contours?

In blowing the trumpet for outdoor recreations the keep-fitters generally overlook an important difference between walking and golf, football, or almost any other sport, the fact that walking is so much more than physical exercise. While you can enjoy tennis or cycling with the most inert-minded companions, how long could you enjoy walking with them? You should repeatedly thank your stars for a congenial walking companion, who can stimulate your interest in fleas or the alleged principles of a political party, blow away your prejudices against macaroni or museums and appreciate your apparently freakish ideas about the evils of football pools or the pre-eminence of Donald Duck as a film star. Walking certainly encourages deep breathing, which helps the inquiring mind, and from the alliance of active mind and active body arises the sense of satisfaction and recreation, which is the reward of intelligent walking.