

JOY OF WALKING

A NEGLECTED ART NATURE AND MAN'S

MECHANISM COMRADESHIP OF A COMMON PLEASURE

Man is primarily a perambulating animal; his legs are Nature's provision for his locomotion. For aeons he restricted himself to them, then he harnessed the sub-human species for his advantage. The advantage has been great, but it has had to be paid for. Horse and wheel served him down the ages. Just a hundred years ago, however, the steam locomotive arrived, physical activity became less than ever necessary, and man instinctively took the way that was most easy, writes a correspondent of the Melbourne "Age." But Nature has decreed that if man insists on being lazy he will be subjected to a heavy penalty. Part of that penalty consists of many of the ills with which humanity is to-day afflicted. Man is putting too much of his mechanism between himself and Nature. Hosts of society's nervous diseases would vanish if men and women would discard vehicular aid and resume the ancient but neglected art of walking.

For it is an art. Every man possessed of full physical powers can transfer himself from one point on the earth to another. But the walking art is something infinitely nobler than that. Walking up from the train to the office, walking from the office along to your favourite luncheon-room, even walking hurriedly and late to church on Sunday, are gross performances to which the term art is quite inapplicable.

No man knew the joy of walking better than did Thoreau. Part of his panegyric on it deserves quoting. "I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of walking—that is, of taking walks—who had a genius for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived from idle people who roved about the country in the Middle Ages, and asked charity under the pretence of going 'à la Sainte-Terré' to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, 'There goes a Sainte-Terré, a saunterer, a Holy Lander.' They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are mere idlers and vagabonds."

Only a man with an inside knowledge of the art could have written so. The holy land of Nature is invisible to those fevered mortals who dash through it in a high-power motor. They are not enjoying the earth; they are merely being transported through the air. What the fools fail to realise is that Nature's charms need for their intelligent observation the time necessary for walking past them leisurely. Observation may lead to fuller appreciation. But, at more than walking pace, the charms do not even appear. Nature has adjusted to a nicely the relation of man's walking powers to the rest of her panorama.

A CHANGING PANORAMA.

That panorama is extensive and expensive; it is always showing and always changing. The experienced eye notes something new every day. One season is especially rich in pleasing signs. We are in that season now. Spring is the ideal time for starting walking. If you are not hopelessly paralytic, get afoot; seek with a light heart the open road. There is a bit of the vagabond in us all. Your fate may be a counter in Flinders lane or a desk in a Government Department. But the nomadic spirit of your remote ancestors is pretty sure to stir within you in the spring.

The old-fashioned vagabond was a picturesque fellow. None of us are that. Civilisation requires us to at least appear respectable; it is our respectability that stands between us and our many secret longings to revert to type. But the initial joy of walking is that many of the badges of respectability may be cut out. You are never likely to enjoy walking as a hobby unless, in appearance, you may be taken for a more or less honest swaggie.

The wearing of old clothes is to youth an indignity; to maturity it is a luxury. In practically all other pleasures that luxury is impossible; in walking it is not only permissible, it is commendable. To the extent that you attempt to be an elegant pedestrian you curtail your pleasure. As you saunter along the highway the great ones of earth will pass you disdainfully by. They will almost certainly, and probably quite accurately, consider you a blot on an otherwise beautiful landscape. But you carry a deep joy in your heart; they have nothing but an unsatisfying pride in their sumptuous car.

In your humbler fellow-mortals you meet with compensations. From the recesses of passing buggy or carrier's wagon some voice comes forth in greeting. You probably secretly imagine that your intellectual cast of feature is bound to be apparent despite the old clothes, the comfortable boots. No fear. You find yourself obviously taken for some quite ordinary person by those who are, like yourself, trudging along the road, and who enlarge their request for directions into an elaborate exposition of their various opinions.

In Melbourne walking clubs seem to be much less popular than when some of us were younger. Walking is evidently being displaced in favour of lurching. Groups of city men now have a hearty midday meal together, followed by twenty minutes of eloquence from some mediocre orator. The change is certainly not in the interests of health.

WALKING CLUBS.

The walking club had many attractions, but of course it also had certain inherent imperfections. There was the comradeship arising out of a common pleasure; but the pacing was always a difficulty. Rarely do more than two pedestrians agree exactly as to the pace to be maintained, the distance to be covered. And in walking nothing can be more exasperating than to be mated with some fool whose ambition is to make records, whose real delight is not in walking as an art, but in achievements about which he will in future tiresomely boast. The artist in walking can always be recognised. He is modest about his achievements, for his achievements are themselves modest. He abhors those bores whose brag is how many miles they did, and the incredibly short time in which they did them.

In these days of mechanical locomotion people don't need to walk unless they wish. The motor, therefore, is rendering the incidental service of revealing those who really love walking. Some people who might become ardent walkers ruin their taste by the crudeness of their first efforts. A stern, soldier-like tramp along some uninteresting road one Saturday ends with a sigh of disgust and satiety, and the walking habit is voted crude. These amateurs are unaware that the habit must be practised intelligently, the pleasures that attend it are disclosed only gradually. For the full enjoyment of the country walk you must cultivate also the contemplative mind.

Walking induces the philosophic attitude to life; it trains a man to distinguish between life's realities and life's vanities. The shallow-minded find it impossible to credit the truth that a hobby so simple and so accessible can be also thoroughly enjoyable. But to the experienced no pleasure is comparable. No inmate of Pentridge looks forward more eagerly to his morning of liberty than certain Melbourne walk lovers look forward to the morning of a spring Saturday.

An hour in the train lands us far from the city's din. The familiar road leads past shimmering creek and through shady gully. Along the main road we paused from time to time to lean on the fences, and to look out across the fields. The cows regard us with a steady stare, find us uninteresting, and turn their eyes from us with all the symptoms of an indifference that is humbling to our self-esteem.

At these week-ends the birds are scurrying to and fro with the excitement inseparable from feathered courtship. Their varied notes seem to have a freshness to which our ears will later in the year be dull. You need not know their names in order to enjoy their music. If you do know them keep the knowledge to yourself unless your companion makes inquiry. The well-informed person can be a delightful companion, but if he is also an insistent informant he can be an insufferable nuisance.

Infinitely preferable is it to walk indolently, and to talk aimlessly yet intimately. On the hill crest we halt to bask in the sunshine, to bare our heads to the breeze, and to watch the ceaseless traffic of the white clouds across the sky. On to the end of the too short spring day we walk with the myriad sounds of nature in our ears. And even the return to the city does not end our joy. For in the still and wakeful watches of the night these sounds will seem to echo, recalling to us the scenes and reviving for us the joys of our long day's walk.