

WALKING AT NIGHT

Dawn would be another hour and a half, but the snow-covered wolds seemed to be basking in the light of a full moon. With the roads blocked, and the air way below freezing, nothing disturbed the midwinter calm. As I hurried through the dark wood I was surprisingly warm.

I was soon out of the beeches and crunching my way along the lane towards the village. From here on there would be four miles of open country. No more nasty dark corners - apart from the abandoned paper-mill, where the crumbling stone walls were buried under ivy, and twisted elders were silhouetted against the sky.

It was there – it had to be – that a cowed figure emerged from the shadows and flashed a black grin before tightening the string round his middle and hobbling off towards the churchyard. “Only Old Harry,” they told me at the post office later that day. “You don’t want to worry about him.”

Well, no – because there are plenty of other things to worry about if you make a habit of walking at night.

Not the least is the knowledge that just about everybody you encounter, apart from tramps - and Harry is the only one I’ve come across in years – is likely to assume you’re dangerous. Or, of course, that you’ve lost it. Lost your dog, that is. Because the only people I ever meet with any regularity on night-time walks are dog-owners; and once you’re half a mile from town even they’re a pretty rare breed.

But why? Don’t other people go stir crazy in the dark part of the year? Don’t other people tear their hair out after a week’s work when they wake up to yet another rainy Saturday? It’s such a long, long haul from late October to early March and the first light evenings. How do other people survive it?

It’s not just a matter of fresh air and exercise. It’s the fact that we live half of our lives in darkness – or should do. It’s a natural state of affairs. So surely it makes sense get to know the dark, and to welcome it. Huddling indoors is a perfectly reasonable reaction to the onset of winter, but once you’ve got used to the fact that it ain’t going to get any better until April, you may as well put your foul-weather gear on after dinner and find out what the night has to offer.

Walking in the dark requires a little forethought, and perhaps two items of gear that you might not necessarily carry in the day. The first, not surprisingly, is a torch. The second is cheaper to run and much more useful: a peaked hat.

Why a peaked hat? Because once you’re out in the dark, it’s the light you need to worry about. Not the lack of it, but its ubiquity. Car headlights, and security lights are top of my own hit-list: it’s not just that they dazzle you on impact, rather that they leave your sight impaired for some time afterwards.

But until someone (please!) comes up with some kind of gizmo which will extinguish them from thirty yards, a good old baseball cap will enable you, by tilting your head a

few degrees, to shade your eyes instantly, and protect your most valuable asset, the thing that city life hasn't yet managed to destroy: night vision.

Night vision is no fanciful notion: it's a scientifically proven phenomenon which takes some time to come fully into play. It's all to do with our eyes' rods and cones. The eye's adjustment from high light levels – in which the cones give us colour vision – to low, in which the rods start to feed us a monochrome view, takes place over the first six or seven minutes of our venturing out into the night. But there is a continued adjustment – and an enhanced capacity for night vision – for up to an hour. Okay, I actually *found this out* last week – but I must have known it all along, because I always felt an instinctive reluctance actually to *use* the torch I carry.

Not only is it a surprise to find how much you can see if you allow your eyes to get used to the dark, but it turns out that most nights are rather lighter than we expect. A nice plump moon is what you hope for, naturally. But even a thin one, a few days past new, casts a terrific amount of light, and of course it's wonderfully atmospheric.

If you want to study the heavens, then a clear sky with no moon offers the best conditions, but it's not a lot of help – in my experience – for walking. A starry night may have you rapt in wonder at the size of the universe and the meaning of life, and may even prompt you to buy one of those books that explains the shifting of the planets, but it'll soon have you stumbling over squashed rabbits or other roadside debris, whereas a full covering of cloud – even in rural areas - will reflect useful amounts of light from quite distant roads or villages.

So, you've got your torch and your hat; and the paper says there'll be a moon tonight. Where to walk? The ideal, I suppose, is a broad track across open fields – and one that's either dry or frozen solid. Unfortunately, with the kind of winter rainfall we've been having in recent years, most footpaths are a quagmire. And a decent frost has become such a rarity that if we ever get one two nights running the leader writers start querying the very concept of global warming.

However, if you watch the weather carefully you'll get lucky sooner or later – and perhaps enjoy the sort of other-worldly encounter I had recently, when the silence of a perfectly still night was broken by a ghostly rushing noise that lasted perhaps fifteen seconds. Something large and animate had clearly shifted a fair distance. There had been a faint rumbling in there too. But as I looked about me there was just the moonlight on a field of frosted beets. Nothing moving at all. Very eerie.

It wasn't until I reached the top of the rise and could see down the side of the hill that I realised it was a flock of sheep, so preoccupied with their frozen supper that they hadn't heard me until I was almost upon them – when they'd *stampeded*. They'd been spooked – but not half as spooked as I was.

Night-time walking is easiest on roads. You may need to study the map, and be prepared for a bit of a drive to find one that's quiet enough, but you shouldn't need to trail out at three in the morning to avoid the traffic. Early to mid-evening is quiet enough on most rural byways. But watch out for that half-hour or so after the pubs shut – or the local clubs if it's a weekend. (When I lived by Hornsea Mere there was a noticeable rush after the evening classes turned out!) This is where the torch comes

in handy, as you absently flash it in the face of approaching vehicles. The faster they're coming the faster the foot comes off the accelerator. I've even known drivers dip their lights – although it's still rare enough for me to record it in my diary afterwards. If you find a deserted road, or a well-maintained farm track, treasure it: you'll be free to gaze at the sky and take in the atmosphere as you saunter along - without stubbing your toe.

If you do feel the urge to walk in the woods, stick to ones you've reconnoitred in daylight, places with which you're familiar. It's surprising how different the landscape looks at night – and it's easy to miss a stile, a gate or a turning. But try just entering a wood and sitting down on a dry stump. Absorb the atmosphere, rather than thrashing about and getting your eyeballs lashed by low-flying twigs. So long as you walk *through* woods you'll tend to frighten away every living creature within fifty yards. You'll move along inside your own silent exclusion zone – always excepting the eruption of a startled pheasant, or a roosting pigeon shuffling about in the trees – wondering why it's so quiet.

Stay still for twenty minutes or so and there's at least the chance that whatever wildlife is around will start to stir, and you'll hear a snuffling hedgehog, a badger, the yip of a fox. Even if you've got your kids with you – and they'll love it, although they do have a tendency to cut off the circulation in whoever's hand is nearest – it's surprisingly easy to maintain silence in the dark. Whether it's self-preservation, an adjunct to our predatory urge, awe, or sheer blind terror, it's some kind of primal instinct, and a valuable one.

I suppose I ought to say something about clothes. Wear something bright at night and all that. No. Sorry. I prefer to be as invisible as possible. On a bike, yes – I'll go day-glo if I have to – but on foot? If I get so decrepit that I can't slip into the verge or duck into a wood it'll be time to give it up as a bad job, and do what I occasionally do now: walk round town.

Because, let's face it, there are times when the weather's foul, you've been stuck inside all day and there's nothing for it but to walk the streets for half an hour and call it a night.. I suppose you need a particularly quirky personality to get a buzz out of the reflections off a rain-slicked pavement, or to make aesthetic comparisons between the varied textures and tones of lamp-light on stone, brick or concrete, but – yes, I have amused myself with such ruminations (it was *very* wet and I was *very* fed up), as I have with glimpses of cats slipping down dim alleyways, of cosy hearths through steamed-up windows, of shadowy figures flitting about behind parted curtains. Hmm... perhaps it really is time to think again – about getting that dog.

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