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Going Up in Smoke

A PROGRAMME on smoking, now being heard from national stations, can be expected to have attentive audiences. The subject has been examined many times, seriously and light-heartedly; but there is always something new to be said, and the centre of interest is constantly shifting. Men have been told for centuries that the habit is beneficial, harmful, wasteful, disgusting, and immoral. A few years ago, when tobacco was helping to destroy Britain's dollar reserve, there was even a hint that it might be unpatriotic; but heavier taxes failed to check the habit, and people now feel that tobacco should not be classed as a luxury. The latest alarm is over the incidence of lung cancer. Medical opinion, admittedly, has been cautious; and one expert recently endeared himself to smokers by saying that the spread of the disease is more apparent than real, to be explained at least partly by improvements in diagnosis. The verdict remains open.

Meanwhile the smoker has other worries. He may have no fears for his lungs; he may be complacent about the cough from protesting bronchi. But he can be nervous about the cost in money. Smoking is expensive, and it is when a man counts up his week's outlay on cigarettes that he is most likely to decide against the habit. From that moment, however, his motive ceases to be financial, and becomes instead a curious blend of prudence and austerity. He is convinced overnight that smoking keeps him thin—or, alternatively, makes him fat. It is obviously the cause of the indigestion which wakes him precisely at two o'clock every morning. Without smoke in his lungs, he assures himself, he will put on weight (or lose it), regain a youthful brightness in the eye, be firm and brisk in step, and live to a green old age. Further, the sacrificial mood growing upon him, he is able to see that by throwing aside the habit he is asserting himself as a free soul. It is shameful

to be so enslaved that a man cannot face a problem, relax for a moment, or even walk up the street without putting himself in a small cloud of smoke.

The pipe-smoker is slower to make this progress from arithmetic to morals. Unless he is over-indulgent—and leathertongued—he probably spends less money than the cigarette smoker. The ritual of filling, lighting and re-lighting a pipe is more deliberate, and has to be fitted carefully into the larger habits of the day. A pipe goes well with reading; it will smoulder for half an hour or more, and the quiet puffing and the rings of smoke can be symptoms of a placid mind. The cigarette is a nuisance to a reader. It needs an ashtray at the elbow, and is burning the lips before one is through the first chapter. A pipe leaves the conscience undisturbed. If the habit is not too expensive, and is part of a man's tranquillity, there is no reason for giving it up. It has been said, however, that pipe-smokers are fewer than they used to be. Cigarettes can be taken in a hurry, and are therefore in keeping with the rhythm of the age. We smoke them, we think, because they "quieten the nerves," because they help us through the day's work, and because thereafter it is easier to go on than to stop. Moreover, the cigarette is gregarious, whereas the pipe goes best with solitariness, especially when the bowl is richly encrusted; and not everybody can bear to be alone. Figures tell us that more people, men and women, are smoking today than ever before. They like it and want it, and no doubt will keep to the habit until they find another. Men find it strangely difficult to keep their mouths and noses unemployed between meals. If they cannot smoke, they will chew; if they cannot chew they will take snuff; and if all else fails they will drink tea or ale beyond the needs of refreshment. Some people do most of these things impartially. We are a restless race, and much in need of comfort.

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