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IS THE SNOWMAN A MYTH?

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Whether he has an existence or not the snowman has become popular in the civilized world as Yeti or the Abominable snowman. The people inhabiting Tibet and the northern parts of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan firmly believe in the existence of the snowman, but the civilized world and particularly the west has not yet accepted it for a fact. Even among the Tibetans the snowman is known by different names in different parts of the country, but the name Yeti, which was carried home by the several expeditions to the Mount Everest and the nearby peaks of the Central Himalayan Axis has become widely known.

I have been to most parts of Sikkim including the strip lying beyond the Central Himalayan Axis and wherever I have been at altitudes ranging between 12,000 and 20,000 feet, I have made enquiries about the existence of the snowman. I even met a few men who claimed to have seen the snowman and all available evidence pointed to some common features, viz., that

- (i) The snowman is an animal of the monkey type and it possesses a short tail and bear-like hair, the hair on the face being particularly long.
- (ii) It walks on all fours, but often on two legs.
- (iii) It is an animal with nocturnal habits and it shuns the presence of human being.
- (iv) It has a call, which is audible only at night.
- (v) It has its abode in large recesses among underground rocks projecting above the surface at altitudes above 12,000 feet, but below the permanent snow line, which is normally roundabout 16,000 feet.
- (vi) It is a carnivore and it has been sometimes seen feeding on the carcasses of pack animals such as mules and donkeys at dusk or at dawn.

At altitudes above 12,000 feet an animal has to be either a grass-eater or a flesh-eater, there being hardly any edible roots, fruits or leaves. It, therefore, stands to reason that the snowman, if it exists at all, is a carnivore. Had I not known a carnivorous monkey I would not easily have accepted this belief held by local inhabitants. I once found a monkey on the Arakan coast of Burma, called *Macacus irus*, which was wholly carnivorous. Besides some birds and their eggs, rodents are plentiful in Eastern Himalayas in the region beyond the upper limit of trees. At altitudes between 16,000 and 18,000 feet beyond the Central Himalayan Axis I found the Woolly Hare-*Lepus oicostolus* quite common and the Mouse Hare (*Ochotona curzoniae*) variously known as Conies or Whistling Hares or the Pika very numerous. At high altitudes where food is scarce rodents do not permanently inhabit any place and they move from one place to another in search of food. This is particularly so with the Mouse Hare,

which lives in burrows in large colonies. When the snow lies thick it hibernates underground. There seems to be little doubt that the rodents constitute the staple food of the snowman. In the circumstances it would not perhaps be unreasonable to expect that the snowman would have to travel far and wide in its habitat in search of food and in doing so may have to traverse long distances involving the crossing of snowcapped ridges. It is also probable that during winter when the snow is thick and extensive the snowman goes about digging for the Mouse Hare lying in its burrow under the snow in a state of morbid stupor. I particularly bring in this point because people writing about the snowman have often wondered what food the snowman could possibly find in large stretches covered with snow. The belief of the local people that the snowman has nocturnal habits and that it shuns the presence of man, would perhaps explain why the snowman is so seldom seen. It being an animal looking somewhat like a bear and somewhat like a monkey, walking like a human, feeding on carrion and moving about by night various fables have been spun around it while journalists have added a great deal of colour. I had no evidence of its ever being seen in any part of the lofty Chola Range on the east of Sikkim, but it was said to be not very uncommon in the extensive Zemu-Chomiomo area, which is mostly glacial and is not frequented by man.

In the part of Tibet lying on the north of Western Nepal the belief is held that three distinct species of the snowman exists and these are locally called the *Nyalmo*, the *Rimi* and the *Raksi Bompo*. The *Nyalmo* is said to be the largest and about twice as tall as the average human, while the *Raksi Bompo* is the smallest being half as tall as the average human. In the Khamba Province of Tibet lying on the north of Sikkim and in North Sikkim itself two species of the snowman are believed to exist. The larger one, known as the *Meego*, is said to be a foot or so taller than man, while the smaller one, known as the *Themu* is said to be not more than about 4 feet tall. The colour of the long fur is said to be dark brown. People are generally very afraid of the snowman, but I could find no evidence anywhere of the snowman ever having done any harm to man. It is quite possible that a snowman would go for a man if the latter suddenly appeared where a snowman might be feeding on the carrion of a mule. For that matter I once had great difficulty personally in holding the charge of a Tibetan mastiff with a stave when I quite unintentionally intruded on a scene where on deep snow the mastiff was feeding on the carrion of a donkey and it fiercely went for me. Where food is scarce and the elements of nature severe, it would perhaps be quite normal for all animals to behave in that manner.
