

The quest for Shangri-la

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The following article was prompted by a recent trip to Nepal and a request from the Editor to write something for the *Journal*. As the last issue of the *Journal* (no. 94) contained an article 'March into Everest' by Myles Morrison dealing with a similar trip, I decided to write something entirely different.

James Hilton, in his novel *Lost Horizon* located his Shangri-La in the Himalayas, for centuries the abode of Gods and Demons. These mountains are a meeting point of stupendous forces – geological, meteorological, but, above all, human – different religions, political ideas, racial characteristics. A pilgrimage to the Himalayas has almost invariably made a lasting impression on the mind of the traveller.

To me Shangri-La is to be identified neither with the Nirvana of the Buddhist religion nor with the perpetual drowsy afternoon of Tennyson's Lotus Eaters. No – it is a goal to be sought after actively. It must be worth seeking and not easy of attainment. An ambition achieved is apt to leave a vacuum. R. L. Stevenson knew this when he wrote 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive'. The search for Shangri-La should be pursued actively and hopefully, and in the company of one's fellows.

In the make up of man there are three constituents – the physical, the rational or intellectual, and the emotional or moral. All three interact. On the physical side, mere strength is not to be sought, nor mere absence of disability or pain. Physical fitness on the contrary should be a positive state of well-being – a *joie-de-vivre* which makes all other activities more efficient and more enjoyable.

To members of the Cairngorm Club, physical fitness should require no justification. However, the following observations may encourage some to adopt a natural method of increasing and prolonging physical fitness.

The human body is in a perpetual state of change. Activity is a form of combustion like the fire in the grate, and it creates waste products. Not only must the body be constantly replenished by fresh fuel, but, equally important, the waste products must be removed like the ashes from the fire if the fire is to continue to burn brightly. Both functions, replenishment and removal of waste products, are performed by the circulation of the blood. The arterial blood replenishes the fires, the venous blood removes the ashes. To understand the circulation it

is necessary to appreciate that the action of the heart is only a part, although a vital part, of the process. An equally important part is the action of countless muscles in the arteries and capillaries which by their rhythmic contraction propel the blood along. These muscles, like all muscles, need regular and prolonged exercise to maintain their tone. It is not sufficient to indulge in violent exercise at the week-end and neglect the muscles for the rest of the week. What is required is regular and sustained exercise.

Most of us have read of communities where a surprisingly large proportion of the population remain vigorous to extreme old age – claims of 150 years have been made. The National Geographic Society commissioned a report on these communities which appeared in the January 1973 issue of their Magazine. The investigation covered communities in the Himalayas, the Andes, and the Caucasus. In all cases, the centenarians had three things in common: (a) they were mountain people; (b) they continued to lead physically active lives; and (c) they maintained their interest in the world around them.

You may ask what all this has to do with Shangri-La. Just as much of religious thought has abolished the idea of a geographical location of Heaven and Hell and holds that they exist in the mind of man, so I believe that Shangri-La will never be found on any map but that it is an activity of the human mind. The qualifications for the quest are perhaps a combination of Eastern Religion and Western Thought – *Mens sana in corpore sano* – coupled with a philosophy that has come to terms with the Universe. The possession of these qualifications would not necessarily lead one to Shangri-La. I doubt whether a Shangri-La which is attainable is worth striving for. Much better to set one's sights higher, and, like Stevenson, to travel hopefully. But the stimulus of a visit to the Himalayas, the land of Gods and Demons, the meeting point of immense forces, physical and spiritual, can give one a glimpse of the way ahead.

I have seen Everest towering above all other mountains, and the knowledge that I shall never climb it does not detract from the experience. Similarly the belief that I shall never reach my own Shangri-La does not prevent me from travelling hopefully towards it. I would like to encourage others to maintain their physical activities to assist them in their quest for their own individual Shangri-La.

