A young Garo girl (the fiancée)

SECRET LANDS WHERE WOMEN REIGN

by

GABRIELLE BERTRAND

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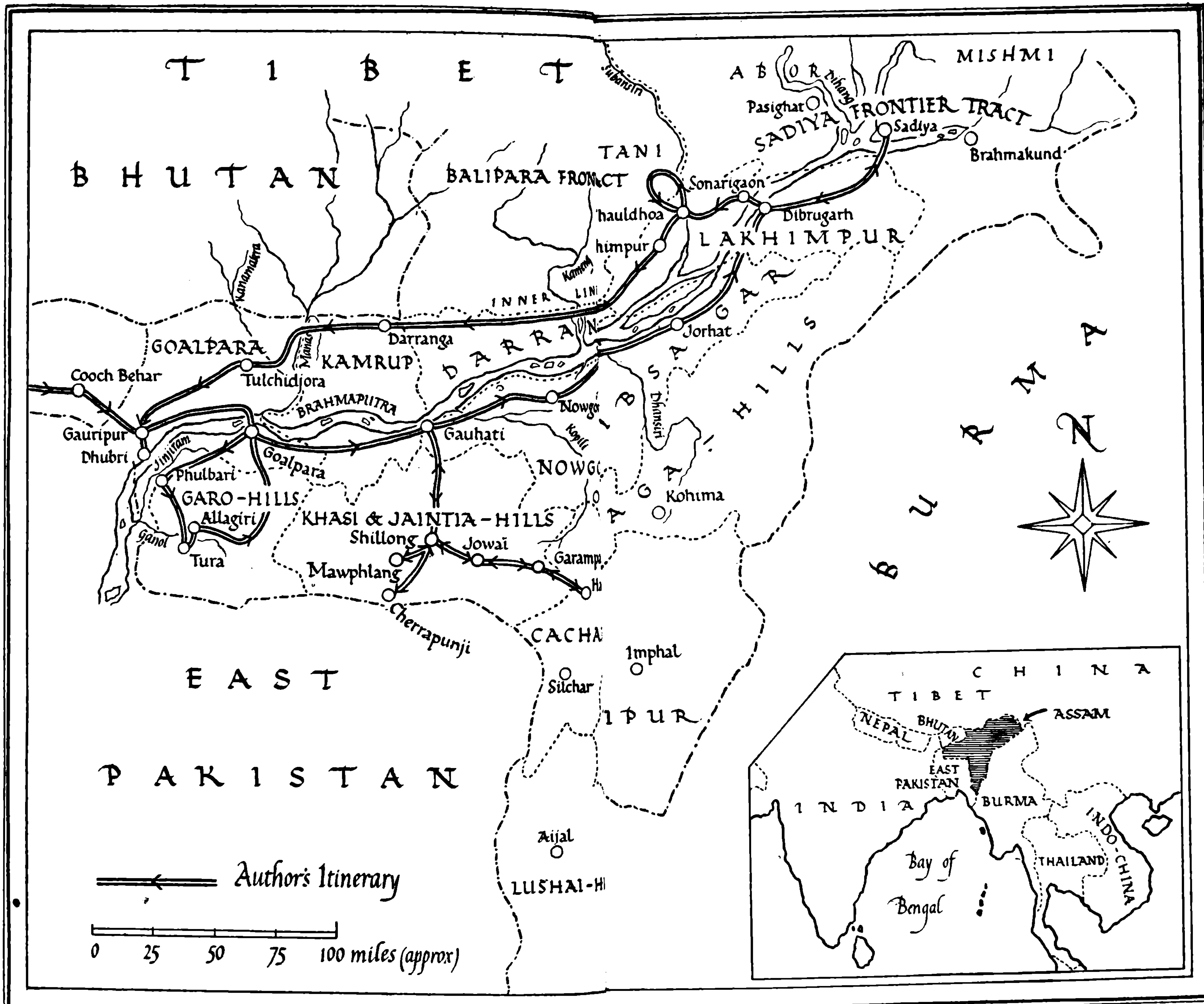
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To
JEAN NAZ

and

PRAKRITISH CHANDRA BARUA
OF GAURIPUR

Prologue

In 1953 my colleague Jean Naz and I arranged this expedition in a few months as an answer to the challenge that what we were attempting was the impossible—being nothing less than a fact-finding journey among the primitive tribes of north-eastern India inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley and the foothills of the Himalayas in Assam, the easternmost province of India.

These frontier regions have always been and are still regarded as closed, for reasons which remain valid. In earlier times the British authorities naturally did not favour the incursions of more or less scientific foreign expeditions into an area which was difficult of access, largely unexplored and peopled by turbulent tribes outside their effective control and not yet emerged from a state of the most primitive barbarism.

That view still prevails, even more so under the new political régime in Asia. England had surrounded India with a sort of *limes*, calculated to keep her isolated from central Asia and Russian pressure. With the help of geography the British could consolidate the states concerned, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, administratively, and keep a sharp eye on their political activities. Admittedly, in the case of Tibet they acknowledged a nominal Chinese suzerainty, while asserting a right to be concerned in everything happening on "the roof of the world", where India's three great rivers take their rise.

The India of today has naturally taken her cue from her predecessor. She has made vigorous protests against the establishment of communist China in Tibet and would never allow a régime favourable to the Soviets to be set up in the buffer states among the foothills of the Himalayas. Whereas the ancient menace was Tsarist Russia, its place today has been taken by Communism, in the shape of expansion by an aggressive "people's" China. The sense of Asiatic solidarity preached by the New Delhi Government suffered a setback when Mao-Tse-Tung claimed Tibet and took possession of that country by force.

Geographical India must be preserved from a Chinese overflow, even in the elementary form of infiltration through the Himalayas, from one end of her northern frontier to the other.

In 1954 China published a map which included not only the territories normally under her control but also a zone extend-

ing from Kashmir on the west to the eastern border of Siam. The western frontier has long been fixed, but the eastern—the area lying between 93° long. E. and 97° long. E.—has always been uncertain. The MacMahon line, an artificial frontier drawn in 1910 by the Geographical Department of the Indian Army, has been continuously disputed by Pekin, which does not recognize the arrangement then proposed by England.

India's foreign policy begins at her frontiers. Concern for the territorial defence of this sub-continent, to use the expression in vogue, a firm resolve to keep India in the British Commonwealth and the will to be the uncompromising champion of Asiatic independence furnish adequate reasons why the New Delhi Government stands no nonsense about the north-eastern frontiers.

Because of its geographical isolation, Assam is strategically by far and away India's most vulnerable province. It is joined to India only by a narrow strip, thirty miles wide, between the most westerly point of East Pakistan and the frontier of Nepal, and then a slightly wider corridor running from west to east between Bhutan and the northern border of East Pakistan. This sole land link is open for only a few months in the year owing to the torrential monsoon rains which cause the northern tributaries of the Brahmaputra to flood their banks and block the whole valley of the great river with disastrous inundations from June to November.

With a view to maintaining political and military supervision an administrative headquarters for these troublesome areas has recently been established at Shillong, the Assam seat of government. It is called the "North-East Frontier Agency" and its function is to get to know them, organize the hitherto neglected tribes and attain the geographical objectives situated between the valley of the Kamla and Tibet, that Agla Marra of the Miri tribes which has hitherto been *terra incognita*. The N.E.F.A. has the job of taking all steps necessary to exercise supervision over this vast No Man's Land at India's back door.

It will be realized that India's rôle, like that of Britain before her, is far from clear. Intervention in tribal affairs beyond very narrow limits is often hotly resented by these ungovernable peoples, who are and always have been among the most primitive on earth. In 1953 an Indian party engaged in geographical and ethnographical investigation was completely exterminated by the Abor, a tribe on the Tibet-Burmese frontier which has at all times played the traitor's part in the great drama staged by the tribes of the north-east frontier. The officers and men were murdered with the greatest brutality, and the porters carried off

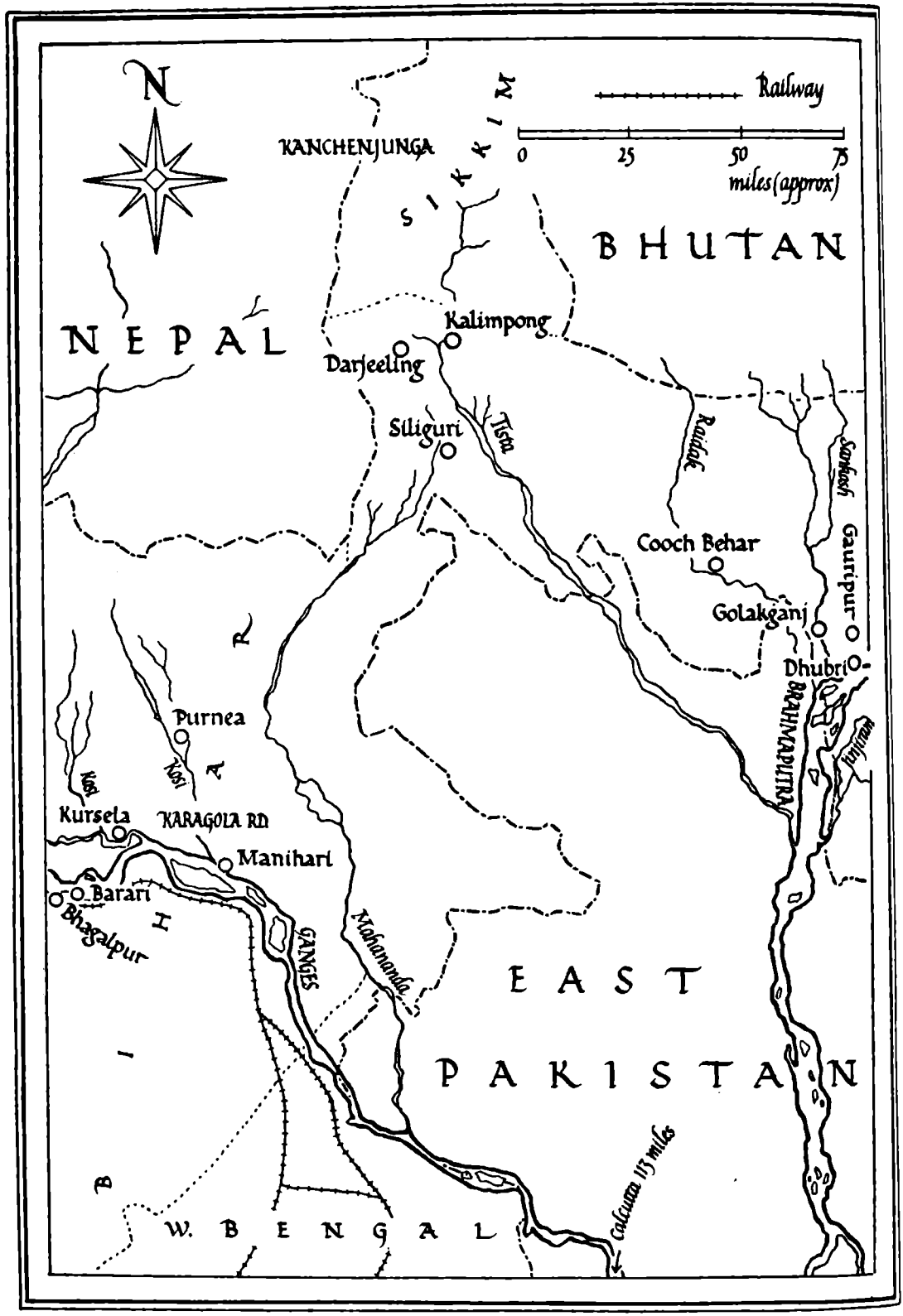
as slaves, because they belonged to a local tribe which was a hereditary foe of the assailants.

It will be appreciated that it is not easy to travel in Assam and we can say that it was owing solely to the confidence we inspired in the Indian Government, and our friendly collaboration with the Anthropological Service of that country, that we were given permission to enter Assam on a research expedition and even have our *permis de séjour*, originally valid for three months, extended to twenty.

In Calcutta I got in touch with Dr. B. S. Guha, adviser to the Indian Government on all matters relating to the Assam tribes. He gave me the keys of the jungle, in the shape of the official documents, the patronage of the Indian Museum and the loan of one of his young assistants, Bhabananda Mukherjee, as ethnologist. This Indian colleague did not want to join us before Goalpara, on the banks of the Brahmaputra. He preferred to take the plane on the Calcutta-Assam route while we travelled by road—a highly speculative operation at the end of the monsoon in the month of September, and with our heavy truck piled high with all our impedimenta.

"It looks to me as though you are in for a very long trip!" Mukherjee remarked at our first meeting.

And a very long trip it proved, much longer than we anticipated.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Golakganj
Dhubri
BRAHMAPUTRA
Purnea
Kursela
KARAGOLA RD
Manihari
Barari
Bhagalpur
GANGES
Mahananda
EAST
PAKISTAN
Calcutta 113 miles
W. BENGAL

PART I

FROM THE GANGES TO THE BRAHMAPUTRA

To get to Assam at all is an expedition in itself! We had left Calcutta armed with a minimum of information about the route to Bhagalpur, on the sacred banks of the Ganges. After four days travelling we arrived in a state of exhaustion at the station-master's office in the little god-forsaken station of Barari-Ghat. He calmly told us that there would be no ferry for ordinary travellers for five or six days, and perhaps a week, as the service was reserved for the Indian north-east army for the time being! If we had only had ourselves to consider it would not have mattered; but there was our transport, a Delahaye 100 C V truck, weighing, with our impedimenta, nearly four tons. It would have been quite impossible to get it on to the ferry.

A friend had mentioned the possibility of hiring a "country-boat", a sort of Indian junk which ferries vehicles with which the ferry cannot cope.

While Jean Naz was engaged in a long discussion over the possibility of getting taken across in a military convoy I went down to the water's edge, hailed some boatmen and explained our plight. A group of coolies was soon vastly interested. I learned how easy it was to make one's self understood in this country without knowing a word of the language! A stumpy, haggard individual, black as any Malay, was produced in due course.

Jean appeared, full of questions.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to fix up a local boat."

"And after that?"

"I've no idea. . . . See what you and Peter can do; I'm sure that very black specimen is our man."

Every European in India finds himself assailed willy-nilly by a crowd of general utility men who are called "bearers". Peter, a Christian from Goa who spoke English and Hindu, was ours. Honest, clean and a good cook, he has none of the obsequiousness common to so many men of his calling, and which it will take much more than independence and time to eradicate,

because it is so deeply ingrained that often enough the bearers like to be treated by the *sahib*[1] exactly as they themselves treat their countrymen of the lowest castes, regarded for centuries as the dregs of society.

Peter argued with the Indians around him and seemed to be getting very excited. They were all talking at once. When he turned to me his gaze was heavy with reproach.

"Has *mem-sahib* asked for a cook?"

"Certainly not!"

This was Jean's chance to take a rise out of me!

Chastened and irritated, I retired to the shade of a banyan tree—an unhappy choice as I was promptly pelted with clods of earth by a troop of monkeys. I could only take shelter in our truck and await the outcome.

Half an hour later my companions returned.

"I've found your country-boat: come and see it."

When I saw the flimsy contraption I thought of the weight of our truck and the time it would take to cross—thirty-six hours!

"They've asked a hundred rupees."

"Have they seen the truck?"

"Yes—and they seem to have their doubts."

"What do you think?"

"It's tougher than it looks."

"Anyhow it promises to be exciting! Back to the Middle Ages!"

The day of adventurous voyages is not yet past, whatever the cynics may say. The river of eternal felicity was a flat, tawny stream flowing to the horizon under the blue sky. Wondrous spectacles came to mind. The Greeks—Ptolemy for one—record how at the beginning of the Christian era great warships sailed to Champa, the modern Bhagalpur, from the port of Tamralipti. Hiuen T'sang[2] mentions in his writings that from time immemorial the "Holy Ganges", the river flowing from heaven to earth, had been an object of worship to the Hindus.

"All who bathe in it," he says, "are purified of their sins. They who drink its waters, or merely wash out their mouths, see the evils threatening them vanish before their eyes. . . . They who seek death by drowning are born again amidst the gods!"

So for thirteen centuries the Ganges, true to itself, has flowed along in a sort of holy torpor. We decided to cross it on the

[1] Master: mem-sahib–mistress.

[2] A Chinese Buddhist pilgrim of the seventh century.

wooden contraption produced, taking with us the five men forming our escort.

The truck was hauled up on the junk after an hour of strenuous effort and we pushed out into midstream, our hearts in our mouths.

Everything in, on and around the Ganges, the movements of boats, the flights of the crimson-beaked birds, the innumerable islands, flat, tawny patches on the surface of the water, is governed by the law of the river. The hours pass, but not as they pass elsewhere, and thoughts dissolve into mere reverie.

Towards nightfall our boatmen engaged in long conversations with other boats passing two or three hundred metres away, employing the sonorous diction of which the last words of each phrase seem a lingering chant. Even the echo takes a long time to die away. But men left no trace of their passage, and at every turn we had quite a job to pick out the tricky current between the changing islands of sand.

After our evening meal we wrapped ourselves up in our blankets, lulled by the slapping of the waves just below, and lay on the straw at the prow, watching and waiting.

"Do you remember our talking about 'over there'?" Jean said.

"This is IT! I think."

About nine o'clock we suddenly stopped in the middle of the river. The sky was somewhat overcast and a mournful silence reigned. The junk master secured the rudder and the rowers rested on their paddles. Swathed in their *tchadour*,[1] in the eerie light of the paraffin lamp they looked like so many motionless brigands awaiting some mysterious command.

The place, the silence, the sudden stop, everything seemed weird. Had we not firmly decided that we would travel all night so as to reach Manihari ferry by the next evening at the latest?

"What's the matter?"

"There are pirates on the river within ten kilometres and sailing at night seems dangerous," Peter announced.

The words came out slowly, which was a sign of anxiety with Peter.

"I believe what they say," he added.

"Ask them again."

"Bands of Santali brigands sometimes attack junks at night," he continued. "They live on the other bank and our fellows say that the men on the boats we passed at sunset have told them that they are hanging about."

It seemed possible that this development had been the subject

[1] A sort of Indian blanket used at night.

of the conversations with passing junks which we had overheard. We now noticed several more boats which had halted in the thin mist covering the river—a melancholy sight which made me think with some dismay of the several million francs worth of impedimenta we were taking with us.

Jean admitted his strong suspicion that our fellows were blackmailing us in the hope of extorting substantial *baksheesh*, yet though we could not understand what they said we could see that they were really worried about something and the leader got genuinely angry when my companion insisted that we should go on.

We stopped arguing and the Indians relapsed into impassive silence, listening intently to every sound coming from the river and conscious that they alone knew its secrets.

Jean got out our .22 mm. rifle and the men drew close and gave us certain information. The danger zone was about five miles away. If we went on by ourselves the risk of attack would amount to certainty, but if we formed a convoy with the dozen or so junks gathered around us the pirates would not dare. This state of affairs had prevailed for five years and the police were helpless. A few weeks before a couple of Englishmen from the tea gardens at Darjeeling had been travelling in the same fashion as ourselves and had forced the natives to carry on. In the pitch dark they were attacked by a small boat containing three pirates armed with *kukris*.[1] Behind it was a biggish junk loaded with some twenty men brandishing firearms. One of the planters had the presence of mind to fire two or three shots at the assailants, whereon the junk turned tail, deserting the advance-party, which had already climbed into the country-boat. The three pirates were tied up and handed over to the police station at the next stop.

The lair of those pirates was more or less public knowledge, but there was a very large number of them and they operated in organized gangs. They came from some thirty villages on the north banks of the Ganges and Kosi.

Vigil on the Ganges. . . . I got up from time to time to scan the stars and breathe in the fresh night air. It was a night of oriental legend—the atmosphere of wonder, the mysterious strangers from a far country, the haunting fear, all the necessary elements were present. Towards dawn the wind brought us the low music of the marine shells used between junks as a signal for departure. The mist cleared extremely slowly and when we moved off again to the accompaniment of the muffled strokes

[1] Big knives always carried by the Nepalese.

of the long paddles, and growing daylight banished our fears, we found ourselves with something else to worry about, something very practical and mundane—the country-boat was creaking ominously. We were midstream in the Ganges and still fifteen miles from the ferry at Manihari.

Our men were concerned. The current was very slow, we had lost a lot of time and we should never be at Siliguri that night unless we reached the Karagola road by eleven o'clock at the latest, especially as we had been told that the use of the two Mahananda ferries was highly problematical.

At some distance to our left we could see some low hills dotted with thatched roofs. The bank seemed quite inviting after spending twenty-four unhappy hours between the sky and the river.

I turned to my companion, who was scouring the northern bank through his glasses.

"Do you think there's a road on that side?"

"No! We've the mouth of the Kosi just opposite. It changes course every year and its bed is capricious. There can't be any real road—a few tracks at the outside."

"All the same, we might make a shot with our truck!"

I was only too anxious to see the last of the boat and eager to try conclusions with the bank, uninviting and risky though it might well be.

"Our map is sketchy. It doesn't show any villages and yet I've an idea that I can see some."

"I can see nothing but a line of yellow sand and a few thatched huts widely scattered," Jean quickly replied. "Your imagination will be the death of you!"

"Tell them to make for the bank."

Paddling hard, it took the men quite an hour to get within three hundred metres of the bank.

"There's a jetty!" Jean said suddenly.

The boatmen shouted and some peasants appeared.

"Is there a road?"

"Yes, there's a road, and it leads to Purnéa," Peter explained.

We were saved!

Jean carefully examined the bank and gave the signal to draw in.

"I think there's soft ground for at least four hundred metres and we've not yet tried out our de-sanding gear. We shall soon see!"

Hidden away among the coconut trees was a village, with inhabitants who would doubtless be charming and friendly by day, even if they took to brigandage by night.

"Here, eat some *chapati*," said Jean, handing me some Indian pancakes. "You'll need all your strength if we have to shove the truck."

The sun, high in the sky, was already a furnace and huge vultures hovered, casting great shadows over land and water or fading into the blue depths of the firmament. An eagle, solemn, silent, ruthless, passed overhead. What had it seen in the brush? Some cattle, little more than skeletons and a sorry sight. A single blow of its curving beak could dispatch the strongest.

Our men asked the villagers if they could produce any planks for a ramp for the truck and were told they would not be required.

We drew alongside and found that, luckily for us, the pontoon was the same height as the deck of our boat. We tied up carefully and Naz started the engine. If the bank had been on a gentle slope the pontoon would have grounded as soon as it received the weight of the truck, but here it was perpendicular and when the front wheels were on it the pontoon tilted dangerously and threatened to overturn.

Some villagers came up at a run and looked horrified when they saw our predicament. We managed to make them realize that we needed help and distributed them round the truck to take the weight off the junk. But there were not more than thirty of them, and at least a hundred were required!

Meanwhile it was getting hotter every moment.

Once again Peter had a bright idea. He spoke to a young man who stood apart from the villagers.

"Only Raj'[1] Bahadur can get us out of this," he said.

"Who's Raj' Bahadur?"

"We're on part of Kursela state territory. Everything here belongs to the Raj'. It's his pontoon we're using."

"Smashing up, you mean. Who's this young man?"

"One of his secretaries. Anyhow, the Rajah himself will be here in a minute."

At that very moment we could hear the sound of a petrol engine. A black speck appeared, transforming itself into a pretty motor launch as it approached and disclosing five or six passengers.

We were in a fix! Not only were we on private property where we had no right to be but we had demolished a pontoon which had only just been repaired. Moreover we were splashed with mud, and the virginal white *dhotis* of the men surrounding the imposing Raj' Bahadur made a painful contrast. As for the local lord and master, a majestic person with white hair, his

[1] Abbreviation of rajah.

surprise on seeing Europeans lined up on his bank was as great as our confusion.

We introduced ourselves and produced our visiting cards and official papers. The fact that we were French was a recommendation and the ice was soon broken. Jean gave a short account of our nocturnal voyage. A sly smile wreathed the Rajah's lips and his suite burst out laughing, so the atmosphere was soon quite friendly.

"The Ganges has become very dangerous for travellers by boat," he said. "Weren't you warned?"

"No indeed! We left Bhagalpur so quickly that there was no time to make inquiries."

"What are you proposing to do? There's no road worthy of the name for thirty miles and I don't know what the tracks are like."

"Then how do people get about in these parts? And what about yourself?"

"There's a railway ten miles away and we reach it by jeep. Nothing else!"

I did not know what to think. The country-boat was swaying and creaking more and more and I was firmly resolved not to set foot on it again.

"What are we to do?" asked Jean.

I turned to Raj' Bahadur.

"We have a good vehicle," I said, "and I prefer to trust to it even if the tracks are bad."

This time there was nothing doubtful about the Rajah's smile and he very generously offered us his hospitality.

"You can at least come to my place for a few hours before you make up your minds. My sons will be delighted to have visitors. It's very lonely for them here."

A horde of villagers was summoned and our truck was soon rescued from the waters, after which it was half pushed and half carried across the sand to hard ground.

The Rajah joined us in it and directed us along the narrow path leading to his residence, more than a mile from the village. We threaded our way between villagers, clumps of arecas and bamboo groves.

I was expecting to find an old-fashioned Indian *rajbati*[1] like the mansions of country notables with which I was familiar, but the type of building which greeted us behind a palm grove was a surprise. It was a modern palace of white marble, in the centre of a vast, English-style formal garden which was one mass of flowers. We were promptly reminded of Antibes or Cap-Martin.

[1] Rajah's palace or mansion.

"Could you have imagined anything like this an hour ago?" Jean whispered.

But I have never ceased to believe in fairies! The handsome old man was surrounded by *longhi*-clad servants and women in their clinging *saris*. One of the women was carrying a fine baby in her arms. She took it to the Rajah, bowed to the ground and touched his feet and then her forehead with her hands—the gesture of extreme deference and submission. Then she made the baby follow her example.

"It's my last grandchild," said the Rajah.

A young servant came towards us, holding out garlands of white flowers with a very strong scent and almost decadent in their delicacy.

"They're *beli*[1]," the Rajah murmured, "an Indian flower which is the symbol of welcome to a guest. Welcome to my house! Do not forget me!"

I think I had tears in my eyes. I shall always keep those flowers in memory of you, the simple, noble and generous Rajhuhans Prasad Singh. To me you embody the India of my dreams. Behind her wealth and splendour, the marble and gold of her palaces, the fresh beauty of her gardens, the real India is represented by you, ancestor of the Hindu tradition, culmination of a long past of character and kindly feeling. In my memory you will ever remain my first real greeting from patrician India, an India no doubt on its deathbed at the commencement of an epoch which may well be one of the great cycles of human destiny.

The palace at Kursela was built a few years ago for the sons and grandsons of Rajah Bahadur, on the foundations of the former rajbati. The three sons are most attractive, though there is nothing of the legendary Prince Charming about them. The first two are farmers and manage the plantations, making full use of modern agricultural technique and implements. The youngest is an engineer. All three fly aeroplanes, and behind the *ghor*, the elephant stables, there is a landing ground and excellent hangars for the two American tourist aircraft which get as much care and attention as favourite children. With such equipment and three pilots there is no difficulty about living on the far side of the Ganges!

How silly it is to regard the Indian as a man who has "renounced the world and its works", though the belief is widespread! India, the many-sided and contradictory India, cannot be summed-up in a definition. Daily contact with things of the

[1] A species of jasmine.

spirit does not seem to make things difficult for my friends, the three young Kumar Singhs. The primacy given to holiness, the Indian emphasis on inward spirituality and the sense of personal religion, have very much in common with what we Westerners call the modern conscience.

The flower garden was adorned with three statues—of Mahâtmâ Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and the *guru*, the private confessor who was responsible for the religious upbringing of Rajhuhans Prasad Singh. This alone is a challenge to the alleged detachment from ordinary life which so many claim to be characteristic of the Indian. Rajah Bahadur gave me the explanation himself.

"My sons can fly an aeroplane and drive a tractor. I've made them what Gandhi hoped to make the whole Indian nation—*practical idealists*. You writers, who are in a position to let the whole world know what you think, must not be afraid of saying that we are *not* a collection of dangerously bellicose pacifists who hide their neurotic fears under idle pronouncements. But mark my words, though we are ready to die in war, we mean to win the peace . . ."

We left Kursela three days later. Having run out of fuel, our friends had to find us enough for a journey of indeterminate duration. No one could really tell us what lay ahead, and it was quite possible that within five or six miles we should run up against some obstacle quite capable of defeating our overloaded truck.

As soon as we were clear of the estates of Kursela's charming "landlord" we found ourselves battling along the difficult track.

"Corrugated iron," said my companion. "We'll meet it all the way."

"Be careful!"

Despite his caution, I had my qualms every time Naz crossed one of the numerous little bridges. Our heavy vehicle made the bamboos bend, though they did not break, and we usually emerged with one wheel off the road and airborne. On two occasions we lost all trace of the ox-cart track, a complex of ruts dug in the mud during the rainy season and hardened to cement in the dry. Our overall width was much greater than that of the ox-carts, so we usually travelled at an angle with the wheels on one side deep in a rut and those on the other on a ridge. In places we landed in marshes, where the rice-fields had encroached on the road, and found ourselves buried in mud. Driving at an average speed of eight kilometres an hour, and never out of low gear, we reached the Purnéa trail just before nightfall.

Yet our trip through this pleasant, undramatic countryside was not without charm and I found myself thinking that local life had seen few changes since the days of the Vedas. Most of the natives are shepherds and live on milk. The ricefields and marshes, the latter blue with water hyacinths, offered us a show of white egrets, tall herons—drowsy contemplative birds in hieratic attitudes—and vultures looking like priests engaged in sacrifices in a superhuman world where scarecrow cattle live and die because they cannot find sufficient nourishment in the spongy vegetation flourishing in the half-drowned soil.

It is only by following remote tracks, as we were doing, that one can get any idea of the strange beings in those parts who lead a poverty-stricken existence between the dry seasons and the annual inundations spelling famine and death, against a tropical background of ethereal beauty hiding little ruined temples in thickets of the most vivid green.

At sunset we caught our first glimpse of the Himalayan chain with all the glaciers of Kanchenjunga turning crimson in the dying light—an unforgettable sight of which we were soon robbed by mist. Then night fell and we were once more swallowed up in thick forest, heavy with overpowering scents, the dense foliage shutting out the light and generating that atmosphere of jungle mystery which always seems a little ominous. But birds could be heard and the evensong of *dahouki*, the endless calls of cuckoos against the eternal music of giant crickets.

For two hundred kilometres we followed the *duars*[1] which form the well-defined frontier of Bhutan, an almost inaccessible independent Buddhist state with valleys all but cut off by its Himalayan passes and formidable gorges. Its powerful neighbours, India and China, exercise no administrative authority within its borders and to preserve its isolation it prohibits visits from foreigners, whether Asiatic or European.

After the second ferry at Dingraghat the forest swallows up half the road and the vegetation seems to forget the frail limit to its authority imposed by the brick surface; its boundless vitality spurns all obstacles and its roots penetrate everywhere.

The loops of the Mahananda river intersect the trail again and again, and at the third ferry we were obliged to look for a suitable spot for our truck to cross; there was a sandy stretch, two hundred metres long, between us and the river and nothing but a ferry worked by hand beyond. A big lorry was lying embedded in mud, its cargo of jute strewn over the ground or making little islands in the water. My companion had to wade

[1] Strips of land at the foot of the Himalayas.

in up to his waist to sound out the muddy bottom and when he took over the steering wheel his teeth were chattering. It is far from warm on an October night in the Himalayan foothills.

At the last crossing we had to steer the raft by the truck's headlights while some of our men waited for us on the far bank waving torches of burning reeds.

On the Golakganj road we came to a rickety hoarding bearing the inscription "ASSAM". Golakganj, on the banks of a gloomy river, is the gate of the "forbidden country". Occupying a vast site, it seems to have been intended for a hive of activity. We could see well-built jetties to which little paddle-steamers with cabin decks were tied up. They looked oddly out of place among their surroundings—a dozen dilapidated buildings, wooden hutments and demolition areas. The big buildings, the quays and the two steamers recalled the time when the lower course of the Sankosh to the south of us did not separate two states which have recently obtained their independence and are still seething with ancient hatreds—India and Pakistan, that great stony waste which stretches away to the hills on the western horizon.

It was depressing to think that not long ago this tributary of the Brahmaputra carried a large volume of trade between Assam and the towns of northern Bengal, Cooch Behar, Siliguri and, higher up, the hill stations of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. From Calcutta the traffic returned up the deltas of the great river to Dhubri and Golakganj, there to be redirected cheaply and expeditiously by the roads, which were kept in good order for four or five months in the dry season.

Today there is no such traffic hereabouts. Such little navigation of the Brahmaputra as there is stops at Dhubri where the customs offices are situated. It is as if, thanks to "Partition", a corner of India had died.

After several days of tiring travel we were at the end of our tether. It was five o'clock in the evening and the ferry had stopped. Yet we ought to have made Gauripur before night and it was only the first stage of our programme. We had been expected there long before.

The brothers of my friend Princess Nilima Barua, whom I had met in Paris two years previously, had sent me a telegram of welcome to Bombay, and though a month had passed I had not been able to give them even an approximate date for our arrival. The traveller who takes to the country roads in India can never know for certain when he will arrive.

Must we give up the idea of crossing the river? It would mean spending another night on the benches of the truck or in the teashop, as we had been doing since we left Kursela. Peter helped in another attempt to find the ferry-man. He and Naz went off in different directions to search the houses. They came back at nightfall defeated but the driver of a diesel lorry, who was equally anxious to cross the river, soon found the man we were looking for, a bearded individual with an unhealthy pallor—no doubt a mussulman and survivor of the bustling thousands who had once made this corner of the Goalpara district such a hive of activity. He was prepared to take two vehicles across but would have refused to put himself out for one, as the government had fixed the tariff and no one would give baksheesh or pay anything extra for crossing out of official hours.

None the less, he seemed a trifle embarrassed when he saw us and said that if he had known that he was keeping sahibs waiting he would have come! As a rule, Europeans did not travel with vehicles like ours and anyhow they had been few and far between in recent years.

After treating us to a number of deep bows with his hand raised in salute, the man took us to the shop where we were immediately surrounded by villagers who offered us very hot tea with milk. They were more intelligent and friendly than the Bengalis. Here, on the rim of the vast Indo-Mongolian plain, eyes were already narrowing and cheek bones becoming prominent. There was plenty of loud and cheerful laughter and the atmosphere seemed quite different in this motley crowd, though Indian blood still predominated. It was very much to my taste. To all these natives this day was just like any other in the monotonous round of their ordinary life, but to me it was the realization of a dream. The landscape, rich in vivid shadows and with the mountains of Bhutan etched in the background, told me that I had at last reached Goalpara, the threshold of that world of mystery and sorcery indigenous to the yellow races to which Assam may be said in general to belong.

"*Those golden peoples who dwell on the far slopes of the Himalaya and among the mountains of the east, the mountains of the Rising Sun in the Kârusa by the shores of the sea and the banks of the Lauhitya*[1], *those Kirâtas*[2] *who live on wild fruits and roots and are clad in the skins*

[1] Probably one of the names given to the Lohit which in the valley becomes the river Brahmaputra.

[2] A reference to the Mongols in the sacred writings of the Hindus. The Kirâtas are the Bodos of Assam, the Tibeto-Burmese race whom we were particularly concerned to study.

of beasts, proud of the arms they bear, and cruel in their deeds. . . . I have seen them, O Lord! And their cargoes of sandalwood, black pepper, precious stones, gold and silver and sweet-smelling herbs."
Mahabhârâta (Sabhâ, 52, 8-10) SABHÂPARVAN.

If there is anywhere in the world where history and legend mingle it is India and in particular Assam, buried in its age-old isolation. "Assam, the land of sorcery" is a phrase frequently found in the twelfth-century mussulman chronicles. Here alone the mighty horsemen of Islam, the Afghan lieutenants of Mohamed of Ghor, the most furious and fanatical of invaders, were stopped in their tracks. Their venturesome foray carried them to the banks of the Brahmaputra, but there they met with disaster and perished miserably, without leaving a single nomad tent to defy the rains of the merciless summer monsoon.

Before the nineteenth century no other stranger ventured to set foot in what might be called forbidden territory, and it was not until the English penetration and the publication of certain monographs by British political officers in the opening years of the last century that a corner of the veil was lifted and the world began to learn of the strange beauty of this wild region. It is only quite recently that an exhaustive survey has been possible, so formidable were the political obstacles presented by the Indian north-east frontier and the presence of primitive tribes, fierce head hunters, living in a region largely unexplored and extremely difficult of access.

"We found ourselves amongst vast numbers of people who differ mightily among themselves!" wrote the fortunate Odoric of Pordenone somewhere in southern China between 1318 and 1328, during the reign of a grandson of Khubilai. And it is certain that in that epoch he was undoubtedly concerned with a number of intermingled societies which had been swept along by the Genghis Khan "fury", but were none the less of the same origin. Odoric had seen for himself the varieties of their social life and culture, varieties emanating from a common stock.

Assam is not a country but a geographical expression for the alluvial valley in which the Brahmaputra, rising in Tibet, becomes a mighty and restless river, its course hampered by sandbanks perilous to navigation and many islands, some of which are several kilometres long. Hereabouts the great stream is joined by other rivers with thousands of cul-de-sac inlets, and its valley is broken by impenetrable jungles, vast stretches of lonely savannah and marshes where rhinoceros, crocodiles and wild cattle hide in the tall grasses.

But the real Assam means the great mountain chain, that frontier and guardian of the plain which secret fears make even more inaccessible, as well as the mysterious Assam of the tribes, an area comprising more than two thirds of the whole country, a vast sheet of turquoise blue where sunlight can hardly penetrate the dense forest and which conceals all the riches of the earth—oil, coal, gold, iron and copper—while free men, beasts of prey, thousands of wild elephants and myriads of insects increase and multiply in the shade of subtropical vegetation.

Away from the valley of the Brahmaputra, Assam is largely an unknown region, a happy hunting-ground for illusion and adventure. As long as the British assumed political responsibility for the area the natives allowed them to satisfy their *amour-propre*—within the limits of the forest region, we should add. While stubbornly adhering to their own traditions, they accepted with indifference the gifts of a shop-keeping civilization, a vague and ill-defined administration and missionaries who distributed garments to cover their splendid nudity and pictures of the good God. But it is only with the greatest reluctance that they tolerate the new order established by an independent India. Free men they have always been and free men they will remain. The new Indian administration is certainly trying to create autonomous districts, each occupied by a separate ethnic group, under the direct supervision of the North-East Frontier Agency, which in practice means New Delhi. But the splendid mountain tribes continue to keep a close watch on Assam's green Brahmaputra valley.

Who are these peoples who have preserved their mysterious prestige even in the twentieth century?

In the south-west, between the valley of the Brahmaputra and the Pakistan frontier, we find the Atchik (or Garo) head-hunters and behind them the Khasis, who worship the Serpent-God. The winter winds sweeping over the vast bare plateau of the Khasi Hills give life and strength to one of the most ancient races on earth, a race which has never yet left its original home. Yet there is a mystery here; these Mongols speak an Austro-Asiatic tongue allied to the *palung*[1] group.

On the Burmese frontier to the east, the last folds of the Himalayas close in on the jungles of the Nagas among whom all the intermediate varieties of head-hunting still survive. From

[1] The palung group comprises the *munda* of India (north-east Deccan), the language of the Moï of Indo-China and that of the tribes of central Malacca. These languages have been studied by Father Schmidt and more recently by the American, Robert Schafer.

the ethnical angle the Nagas comprise several secondary tribes. Their land is vast, extending as it does from the mountain home of the Mikirs, unwarlike cousins of the Garos, to well beyond the present Burmese frontier.

Before the last world war Burma was British territory and the Naga tribes presented a purely domestic problem. Today they demand full autonomy, as the frontiers which have been forced on them, Burma on one side and Pakistan on the other, are distributing a highly homogeneous ethnical group over various foreign territories. Furthermore, their tribal laws, which are laws of racial preservation, are incompatible with this separation, which prevents free intercommunication. It is not surprising that the Nagas are in revolt.

On the north the Himalayas spread their mighty cloak from east to west over the Brahmaputra valley, and in its folds hide the most primitive of these little peoples the Abors, Mishmis, Apa-Tanis, Daflas, Akas, Miris, and probably some others whose names have yet to be discovered.

In the dawn of history the negrito tribes constituted the original substratum of the peoples of the valley. Then the Austro-Asiatic peoples, in an epoch still legendary, left traces of their coming and going in the Khasi language and, later still, nomad mongoloids came down in waves from the upper valleys of the Blue River, the Meekong and the Salween. Others arrived from the lake regions north of the Tsampo valley and left their unmistakable imprint on the banks of the Brahmaputra before passing on to the mountain jungles around them. Here they fixed their home, in a stage of civilization which has not changed since their first appearance in these conquered regions. Akin to these last mongoloid tribes are the Bodos of Assam who belong linguistically to the Tibeto-Burmese group.[1]

It was only after an immense and quite incalculable interval that the Aryans conquered the valley and their civilization took centuries to develop. Yet the physical and moral impregnation of all these successive ethnical entities can still be traced. To it must be attributed that culture, exclusive to Assam and of which so little is known, which deserves years of patient study and research, if only because there are no written records before the fourteenth century. If I began with an investigation of the tribes, it is because it marks my introduction to the valley. Everything starts with the primitive refuges, remote from the

[1] The term Bodo indicates that they came from the Tibetan region, though their original home had been the upper reaches of the Yang-tse-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho in China.

great world outside, where the direct descendants of the mongoloid peoples represent a miracle of survival.[1]

At night the market-place of Gauripur has an atmosphere which rolls back the centuries while leaving a queer feeling that the present and the world of the living are not far away.

A fine straight road leads directly into the town under a canopy of dark green foliage. There was a crowd milling round in the bright light of oil flares. I would have liked to get out, mix with the people and try the sweet, strong tea in the first teashop but Jean Naz, peering through the curtain, insisted on asking for the residence of our friends, the Barua princes.

"Can you tell me the way to the Rajbati?"

"Straight on," replied a young man with delicate features.

The subdued lights from a group of buildings made them distinguishable in the darkness. We stopped opposite the architectural curves of a nobleman's house. Strains of music and the sweet smell of frangipani greeted us. A young man came forward. He was a clerk in the *rajkumar's*[2] service.

He was most apologetic while telling us that none of the Baruas was at home and he did not know what to do as he had not been told anything about us. "But there's a rest-house at Dhubri, five kilometres away," he ventured.

It was the only solution!

It did not take us long to get to Dhubri, a noisy little town with kilometres of streets lined with shops and a swarming population. Stalls innumerable were piled high with all sorts of fruits, red, orange, yellow and brown curry powders and mountains of peppers and aubergines. I had plenty to see; industrious creatures roasting and boiling curdled milk, and preparing chapati and *nân*, teashops and others selling tobacco rolled in red leaves, betel and modern cigarettes, coppersmiths, hatters and textile booths, distinguished by the pungent smell of materials recently dyed. The whole scene, dominated by human ants and innumerable cows, was an absorbing spectacle. Our first call was at the "town stores", run by the representative of B.O.C.[3] to whom we had a letter of introduction. Everybody crowded round and plied us with questions.

Fortunately, the little cups of tea soon appeared, as we were nearly asleep and I could hardly talk. Naz collapsed over a

[1] Dr. B. S. Guha finds in Assam a Palaeo-Mongoloid strain and considers this the more ancient stratum of the population forming a dominant element in the tribes living in the land.

[2] Son of the rajah, a title equivalent to prince; *rajkumari* in the feminine.

[3] Burmah Oil Company.

table and it was all I could do to get him to swallow the refreshing concoction. All he wanted was to be taken to the rest-house, but the talk went on for a good hour and I had to drink five cups of tea to keep myself awake. Eventually we staggered out into the world of mud and commotion which was the town, and looked for our night's lodging.

The rest-house was full up with government officials on their rounds at the beginning of the dry season, when the roads first become practicable.

At the quays of the Brahmaputra, whose waters reflected the lights of junks innumerable, the "flat"[1] was of course quite full up with travellers making for upper Assam.

"There's a big hotel, very comfortable on Indian lines," suggested the amiable fellow who was acting as guide.

We did not mind, though the centre of the town was a bit frightening with its non-stop din at all hours—the din which might be called the hallmark of our age and rules the smallest Indian town even more tyrannically than the great European capitals.

We came to the "Town Hotel", all white and new, "for health and comfort". It was barely one year old. As I anticipated, it was incorporated in the ultra-modern, garish building in which the most important cinema was established. The radio was blaring the signature tune of the big Indian film of the moment. My companion and I would gladly have fled into the wilds but hunger was even more compelling than sleep.

We were fixed up on the first floor, in a very clean little room under an enormous electric fan. A glass of soda water revived us enough to be able to read and choose our dinner. When it was over and we were sipping our fragrant coffee a journalist burst in and handed me his card—"Dhubri correspondent of the *Jamanat, a Progressive Bengali News and Views Fortnightly*".

So our arrival had already been noised abroad! In no time the other room was cleared and the doors were locked. Only one of the men who had come in with the journalist remained with us.

"Intelligence Department," he said in a somewhat acid tone. "I should like to see your passports."

I felt far from comfortable, stole a sidelong glance at Jean Naz and saw him turn pale and say good-bye to the soothing effects of his dinner.

The passports were in my attaché-case which was at the bottom of the truck, as I had had no occasion to use it since we arrived at Bombay. The police at Delhi, duly notified of our

[1] A sort of hotel on moored boats.

itinerary, had not given me any document authorizing entry into Assam and all I had was official letters from the Indian Anthropological Department under whose patronage we were travelling. These I never let out of my sight. I showed them to the police officer who scrutinized them carefully but said nothing. Then he drew out a fountain pen and solemnly copied the lot into a grimy notebook. The process took twenty minutes. Then he rose and gave us an apologetic smile.

"The police are very strict in Assam," he said, "and you should have known it. We always know the moment a foreigner turns up. Besides, you're in a frontier town and the frontier hereabouts is far from quiet. I am very sorry to have caused you any inconvenience but it's my job."

We paid the bill. By now our sole concern was to get out of this town and seek the quiet of the open country, rice-fields and jungles as quickly as possible. The noisy streets gave us a good excuse for leaving at once.

It was eleven o'clock in the evening when we were back among the tall grasses of the little village, now slumbering peacefully. The market was dead and there was no one in the streets. The furtive shadows of the jackals were the only signs of life.

I do not know how we managed to find the rajbati again, but was not at all surprised; something seemed to tell me that we should have no further to look and that some highly personal guardian deities were watching over us. They took the form of a young man in white. I could hardly see him in the dark, but his voice was audible enough.

"I am one of Rajkumari Nilima Barua's brothers. Please come in. We've been expecting you for some time!"

We were spellbound and did not move. The Indian must have thought that we had not understood, as he emphatically repeated the invitation:

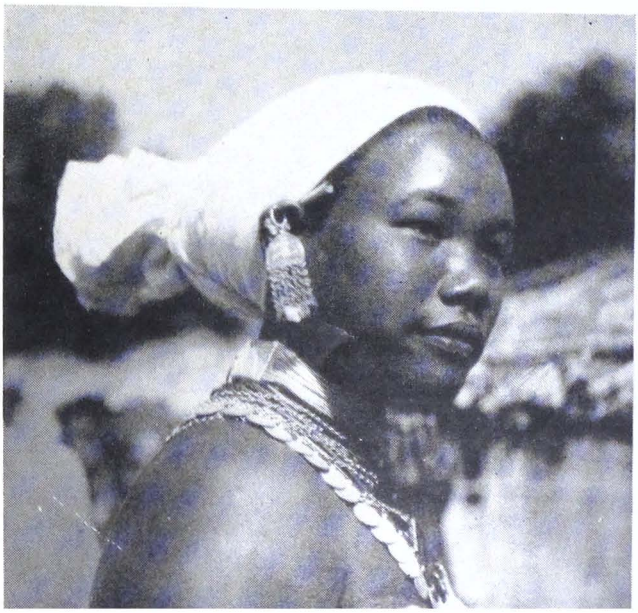
"Come in!"

I got out of the truck, leaving Jean to park it, and followed the white shadow with the imperious voice into one of the rooms on the ground floor which looked out on a huge terrace lit by a feeble electric lamp, probably served by a worn-out dynamo.

The little salon which we entered was sparsely furnished—three chairs with faded covers, a round marble table and a stool made from an enormous elephant's foot. The air was saturated with the stale odour of dried flowers and incense sticks. Princess Nilima's youngest brother, whom I could see better even in the dim light, called to mind the delicate elegance of rajput

A young Garo (the fiancé)

(*Above*) My men: Peter, our faithful bearer, Mukherjee, ethnologist, and Jean Naz, my assistant



(*Left*) Young Garo woman in carnival dress

miniatures. The Baruas are of very ancient descent; their ancestors were not grandees who lived at the courts of the decadent great Moguls in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but members of the upper hierarchy of those Hindu administrators who had come from the courts of Mithyla or Kanaudj and taken up residence in Assam in the seventh or eighth century.

I sat down on the arm of a chair, somewhat fearful that it would collapse under me and the prince vanish from sight! But no, he was more substantial than I had thought; he began to roll a cigarette, looking hard at me all the time. His slanting eyes betrayed the ancestral Mongol heritage.

"You must have had a tough job getting here," he said.

"Yes, and we never stopped, as our one idea was to get to Gauripur."

Yet, tired though I was, I found it quite hard to yield to the strangely soothing atmosphere of the place.

"My name's Amahl," the young man continued and added, as if appreciating that I was not at my ease: "Don't worry! Everything's all right now you're here. We'll put you in this room. It's the only one available, though unfortunately there's nothing that Europeans would call comfortable in our old house."

Naz, entering the room at that moment and quite at home, protested:

"We're used to living in the bush. It's very comfortable here."

"I'll have some *neouar-kat*[1] brought in for you," Amahl continued, offering Jean his packet of tobacco.

"It's quite unnecessary," my companion interrupted. "We have our camp beds."

There was a pause when no one spoke. Such silences would be intolerable in our Western countries. In such circumstances one would feel compelled to explain the situation with a flood of words. My long experience in the East once again brought their futility home to me. Our silence itself told our story and explained the incongruity of this nocturnal descent, the long journey, our weariness, white faces and overwrought nerves.

Two sleepy servants, quickly adjusting their little loin cloths, appeared out of the shadows, dragging their weary feet, and were followed by others carrying big silver trays loaded with various foods. I should have found it difficult to cope with such fare, so while nibbling at milk cakes I was able to admire the way in which Jean Naz got through his second dinner.

[1] Folding-beds.

My tangled nerves gradually unravelled while Naz, recovering his usual *aplomb*, gave a voluble recital of our adventures until Amahl suggested it was time to go to bed.

"Good night," he said, with a kindly smile not free from a trace of mockery. "You must be very short of sleep!"

By day the rajbati seemed as mysterious as at night. Nothing could be heard but the sound of domestic activity, calls and, in the distance, fragments of conversation in loud tones. There was mystery everywhere, but it was human mystery. Long galleries, half smothered under bougainvillea, led to several well arranged buildings of indeterminate architecture, of which the dominant character was a curious mixture of the style of 1900 and delightful Chinese features. Amahl explained that his father, Rajah Prabhat Chandra Barua Bahadur, had had all this built fifty years before, under the supervision of a Pekin architect who had studied in France.

At the far end of one court, and concealed under their ritual vegetation, I could distinguish two little temples which must be a hundred years old. The young man led me to them. The air was heavy with the heady scent of musk and essence of thuya. A service was in progress in the shade of one of these temples. I could hear chanting to a faint accompaniment of cymbals, the sounds mingling with the cheeping and squawks of blackbirds, green parakeets and turquoise blue jays.

Through a big open window I could see golden statuettes representing the household deities of the Baruas, and here and there more dramatic symbols such as the red trident, the emblem of Siva. In the distance, Krishna, the god of love, was keeping watch under an altar wreathed in jasmine.

I could hear the officiating priest, standing by the bowl filled with the blood of newly-sacrificed kids, giving utterance to a spiritual fervour wholly inspired with faith and love, and such as we in the West have never known since the Middle Ages. There can be no doubt that our involuntary reluctance to enter Hindu temples is explained by the infidel's sense of sin, the unhappy realization that we have no faith. We have lost this, the sole source of power, the cock which once crowed within us, symbol of the love of all that lives and of trust in the bounty of nature and the beauty of her handiwork. That cock is God and the god Pan, and Siva and his cosmic dance; it is the illusion which helps men to live and say farewell to life. In India it is always being brought home to us that religion is the fundamental outlook of the people.

From a distant corner of the garden came the voice of some-

one singing one of those nostalic *waouiya*[1] which are so popular hereabouts and have words like the pure Persian text of the poems of Hafiz or Omar Khayyam:

Harken, 'tis the night,
The night in song
High o'er the meadows refreshed by the dhakina[2]
She sings of the loves
And the lovers of Goalpara . . .

How time presses when one suddenly feels centuries of history falling on one's head! And what is the use of tying an explorer down to a time-table? We visited all for which Gauripur has stood for hundreds of years—the palace on its hill dominating the encircling river Gadhadhar and the home of the elder brother, Prakritish, lord of the jungle, the little town and the plain sweeping away to the Brahmaputra and the blue line of the Garo Hills, laid out like a fresco and sharp as a miniature.

Rajah Bahadur Barua died about twelve years ago. His library shows that he had a fine taste in literature. His sons are not much interested in the old books which I discovered, to my great delight. Amahl pulled out piles of volumes with parchment bindings, stained with damp, their pages so tunnelled by insects that I hardly dared turn them for fear of their crumbling to dust. In great chests secured by triple locks he showed me old manuscripts in Sanskrit and Persian characters, and ancient title deeds which are relics not merely of Assam but of the courts of the kings of Bengal. In one of them is mention of the founder of the family, a certain Mankha Dasa, whose numerous writings are referred to in the Tibetan work *Tdjanjur.* This sage, who came from north Bihar and enjoyed a great reputation for wisdom at the court of an eighth century King of Bengal, was a *kayasthe* of one of those dynasties of court scholars who hung up their coats of arms in the ancient Tibetan Buddhist school. It is only in the fourteenth century that the history of the Kayasthe families of Assam, to which the Baruas of Gauripur belong, begins to be recorded in writing. During a period of six hundred years these families, along with several Hinduized Tibetan tribes who came down from the Himalayas, were to provide the social backbone of Lower Assam, reigning over the astonishing ethnical chessboard which history has created over the centuries in this remote corner of the globe.

[1] A specifically Bengali or Assamese variety of poem which is part of the folklore of north-east India.

[2] A cool south-west wind coming from the Bay of Bengal which blows in spring before the monsoon.

Amahl took a certain pride in translating from the Bengali (itself translated into Sanskrit by his father) an old document dating from 1490 in which it is recorded that Chana Giri, a puissant lord of their lineage, had had a list of his great possessions engraved on tablets of gold—a list comprising not only fabulous quantities of jewels and precious stones but a thousand elephants, two thousand horses and two thousand foot soldiers. No contemporary European court, not even the court of France, richest of all, could boast of even one thousandth of the incomes of the Indian princes! It is not surprising that the tales brought home by travellers such as Plan Carpin,[1] Pope Innocent IX's envoy, Rubruk, Saint Louis' ambassador to the great Khan Mongka in 1254, and Marco Polo were received with polite scepticism by their contemporaries. The latter reiterated on the point of death that what he had said was true and added that he had not told half of what he had seen! *Non scripsi mediantem de us quae vidi.*

There is enough material in these documents and rare chronicles to furnish a record swarming with these princelets of Assam, favourites of mighty Indian emperors, opportunists, warriors or sybarites, drunk with love, music and hasheesh, and as exciting to study as our great feudal seigneurs in the Middle Ages.

In those days Europe thought that Asia stopped at the Indus and the island of Obropaine. Did not Brunetto Latini, Dante's master, write that further east there was nothing but deserts inhabited by anthropophagi!

To the Venetian, Marco Polo, goes the credit of revealing to us a civilization so advanced as to make our own countries seem barbarous, and lands so rich and resplendent that they were the envy of all the Western sovereigns for centuries.

Bhabananda Mukherjee is waiting for us at Goalpara, a hundred kilometres away on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra. We are to return to Gauripur in June, to take part in the tiger hunts before the monsoon from the captive wild elephant camps which are organized by Prakritish Chandra Barua, Amahl's brother, in the jungles north of Goalpara on the Bhutan border.

[1] Plan Carpin visited the Great Khan Guyuk in Upper Mongolia in 1246.

PART II

GARO HILLS

AMONG THE ATCHIK HEAD-HUNTERS

"Savage means 'of the forest,' and suggests something appertaining to animal life in contrast to human culture."

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

I

AT Goalpara we did not find our friend Mukherjee at the rest-house. The custodian told us that he had called there a few days previously but had preferred to move on at once in a Forestry Department jeep. I must admit that I sympathized with him; the wooden building, in Swiss chalet style, must have been charming and well maintained under the English, but was falling into ruin. The great sodden forest had all but reached the roofs which were collapsing in the embrace of the invading creepers.

After loading a good stock of petrol we took the road to Phulbari, where we arrived just before 5 p.m. Here the ascent begins to Tura, the district capital in the heart of the Garo Hills, forty-seven miles by the road which has just been opened to traffic.

"I don't know whether you'll get through," a Goalpara trader warned us.

It is easy with a jeep, but with a vehicle like our Delahaye the trouble is to get it round the narrow bends. We came to a barrier in our path, a huge tree trunk secured by chains with a padlock. "Traffic's interrupted," said an Assam watchman, emerging from behind the barrier.

We were in a panic. We had enough time to reach the first halt, twenty miles away, by nightfall. But no, the road was dangerous and so narrow that the restricted vision from vehicles made it impossible for two to pass. A one-way timetable had been fixed—four hours for both ascent and descent. After a convoy arrived there had to be a half hour interval

before traffic in the opposite direction could be resumed, as otherwise the road might not be open.

We had two hours to wait and Naz employed the time in taking Peter to shoot wild duck by the banks of the lovely river Jinjiram, which was not far away. They came back just as the barrier was raised and Jean immediately took the wheel. Two jeeps passed. Their Indian drivers gave us a friendly nod and shouted something which we did not understand.

Peter had just time to jump in behind before Jean started up the engine. At that moment I noticed the watchman on my side gesticulating, shouting and pointing to a board on which something in Bengali characters was written.

"Don't pay any attention. Let's go," said my companion. "It's quite late enough already."

He slipped in the clutch and drove off, muttering: "We'd never get anywhere if we listened to them."

I was in two minds and wondering what the words on the board meant.

Night fell quickly on that unholy road. A strong and all-pervading smell of humus and sandalwood hung under the branches. The dense jungle closing in on the sides of the road reeked of damp and voiced the stirrings of mysterious hidden life.

Driving very slowly because of the sharp bends, behind which anything might be lurking, Jean suddenly pointed to some objects caught in our headlights—great mounds of something dark right in the middle of the road.

"There are wild elephants about," he said. "Here's where they've been crossing."

The relics of the great pachyderms accompanied us for a good half kilometre.

"Look down the ravine to the left," he added. "Those tunnels in the jungle are where the creatures get through."

I confess that I was rather nervous and beginning to dislike the look of things. We crossed the beds of some streams, but though they were nearly dry they proved difficult to negotiate because of rocks and the immense pools of mud which caused wheel spin. Then the ascent became steeper and the loops in the road more and more acute.

We had continued in this fashion quite fifteen kilometres and had just climbed out of a ravine when Jean suddenly jammed on the brakes. Ahead of us was what looked like a high black wall, a fantastic spectacle in the light of our headlamps. We at once realized what it was—wild elephants!

Travellers in jungles by night know what it is to meet elephants, creatures more fearsome than tigers!

One of them, a huge male, faced us, raised its trunk and trumpeted. Naz swerved so as to force the two nearside wheels into the ditch and against the bank. One never knows what frightened animals will do, and if they charged there would be less risk of our being hurled into the ravine. A female crept up behind the male, pushing her baby with her trunk, two others separated from the herd and came rushing towards us, showing signs of anger, twitching their ears and stamping their ponderous feet.

"It looks bad!" murmured Naz. He switched off the engine and the lights in the hope that they would calm down.

We could sense them milling round not far away, probably uncertain what to do but still very nervous, and trumpeting wildly, and we could hear the crashing of branches and bamboos. While we were still wondering what was coming they decided to make for the jungle covering the slope on our left. The black wall vanished, revealing a star-studded sky above the trees.

We recovered our breath. I must admit that we had had a very considerable fright. By degrees the noise died down and distant trumpetings confirmed that the elephants had really gone.

"That's that! We're not going further after such an escape," said Jean. "I'm going to light a big fire and we'll keep it going all night."

Our hearts were still thumping and we scanned the jungle intently before venturing out of the truck. Silence reigned. We were assailed by swarms of tiny flies which were irritating, though they did not sting. They are nasty little things which always accompany elephant herds, feeding on their excrement.

Very gingerly we alighted. The slightest rustle of leaves or cracking of branches turned us to stone. Behind the dark green wall of the jungle I sensed the presence of hostile wild life. When we got round to the back of the vehicle we raised the flap to call Peter. He was lying buried under the folds of the tent. He emerged when he heard our voices. In the light of our electric torches, his face wore an expression of dismay and reproach.

"Why didn't the sahib listen to the drivers and the watchman at the barrier?" he grumbled.

"What's that?" Jean muttered, perplexed.

"The drivers warned us that they had seen fresh dung on the road and the watchman showed us the board with the words: "Closed at night because of wild elephants". We really ought not to be here. Traffic stops on the Garo Hills main road at five o'clock in the evening."

Next day, climbing a narrow road overhanging a deep valley and forcing our way through subtropical jungle held together by creepers, we appreciated that it was better not to travel at night.

Where shall I begin with my effort to describe the overwhelming yet confused impressions of a stranger arriving for the first time in these native villages where civilization has practically stood still? Recalling my first contacts with that Garo community which has preserved its way of life and remained loyal to its traditions, I remember that the shock was so sharp that what I wrote at the time now seems to lack realism. But as I read my notes again (I kept a daily record) I feel that quite possibly their spontaneity is their sole merit and nothing is to be gained by touching them up. So I am reproducing them with virtually no alterations.

Atchik-Mande—Atchik-Asong[1]

September 1953

The drive up to Tura reminded me of certain Moï districts in Upper Annam, jungles of tall, slender bamboos with bright green foliage standing out against a background of dark forest. On the far side of the roads, with their red soil surfaces furrowed by rain and heat and cracked by landslides, there is a panorama of encircling mountains and great stretches of wild country which is almost unknown.

We reached the frontiers of fairyland. Behind the Agaves, the first villages offered glimpses of neat huts, perched above cotton and rice fields.

The trail broadened out and became a fine road where the jungle retreated and gave place to fields and plantations on both sides. Rongchugiri,[2] inhabited by the great Machi and Chisak tribes, is the centre of an agglomeration of fifteen villages with sonorous names, well-mannered villages quietly defying time. The Garos come from twenty to thirty miles round to hold an open air market, available to the lowlanders as well. All the usual Bengali wares are offered for sale—fruits, small domestic animals, leaves gathered from wild tea bushes, indigo paste, gunpowder and the skins of animals such as red dogs, wild cats, civets and anteaters.

My first impression was the charming sight of a homogeneous crowd moving around in a thin cloud of dust in the noonday glare. The Garos go about half naked and reveal

[1] Atchik-Mande—the Garo people; Atchik-Asong—the land of the Garos.

[2] In the Garo dialect *giri* means village.

shapely bodies and skins tanned to a warm brown which contrasts agreeably with the bright blues, reds and yellows of their clothes. One would think that a whole civilization is obsessed with a passion for forms and colours calculated to enhance the importance of fine silver ornaments, rich materials, the teeth or fangs of wild beasts and bracelets and necklaces made from elephants' tusks.

For a second I caught one of the men giving me a calm, steady stare. In the market, where the country traders from the Goalpara or Mymensingh districts have been trying for twenty years to get the better of the Garo, the latter, with his sharp wits, pride and sense of justice, has always come off best. His delightful bully-ragging always amuses his compatriots and their laughter sounds like a war cry to the traders from the valley. After all, it is not so long since these men of the tribes poured down from the mountains to cut off heads, and made necklaces of them. No wonder they still inspire distrust!

The Bengalis and Assamese see them as creatures abounding in vitality, that formidable vitality which lowlanders exposed to flood, famine and epidemics lost centuries ago.

Before the Indian Government sent officials to check prices on the cotton market, the Bengalis were always trying to see just how far they could go in their deals, but drew back at the slightest hint of trouble. But today, when the dealing prices are called out, the Garos present burst out into loud laughter if they consider them unfavourable and some of them pretend to withdraw their offerings. The bargaining becomes general and official, to the accompaniment of ribald banter on the part of the mountaineers. They always win in the end.

Amahl Barua is coming to the Garo Hills in the dry season to capture wild elephants. He has told me that right up country he has seen newly-severed heads on posts in front of the huts.

I believe him.

It is barely fifty years since anything began to be known about the Garos and it was the British who first cast an eye in their direction. There was a general report that the Nokrek Hills, a long line of blue haze as seen from the Goalpara plain, were the home of bloodthirsty savages living in a climate so deadly as to be mortal to anyone else.

From time to time there were bloody raids into the plains and the authorities lost count of the number of peasants ruthlessly slaughtered. One section of the Garo Hills district was eventually pacified but the raids continued in the Goalpara district and the heart of the true Garo country. Even today there are

cases of raiding which end in a genuine head-hunt. In these family affairs outsiders are not concerned.

In earlier days there were innumerable pretexts for these "descents". A good example was the death of a *nokma*, or village headman, which always called for a human sacrifice. When slaves were in short supply, what could be easier than to stage a round-up in the plain and carry off some inoffensive Bengali or Assamese who was quite unable to protect himself.

There are authentic reports of many incidents of this kind. In 1916 an English official on a tour of duty with a military escort in the interior collected more than two hundred skulls in the Rongchugiri district alone.

In his *Ethnology and Folklore* Gomme writes that the Garos have a horrible method of settling blood feuds: "After a quarrel the two parties plant a *mandal* (a tree which bears a bitter fruit)[1] and swear a solemn oath to take the first available opportunity to eat these fruits in liquid extracted from the head of an enemy . . ."

The method of preparing this dish has been explained to me. It was quite simple. When the guests were assembled, the fruits and the head were boiled up together and the resulting broth was handed round, after which the whole company joined in uprooting the tree and the quarrel was forgotten. But not before!

Captain W. Sangma, of the great Garo Sangma clan, made a pregnant remark at our first meeting at Tura:

"Go and live in the villages in the interior. Spend as much time as you can among my compatriots and eventually you will learn something."

The bright petals of the red bougainvillea were quivering on the terrace of the wooden bungalow in which he lives and the air had that rare limpidity peculiar to the beginning of the dry season.

He swept his arm in the direction of a long line of jungle on the far side of the little town.

"If you stayed long enough you'd have a chance to get to know them, both the people and their history. It's well worth the trouble, as even now very little is known about them. Have you any idea of the marvels these hills have witnessed, long, long ago?"

While the darkness climbed into the starry sky and then gradually yielded to dawn Captain W. Sangma told the story. . . .

[1] *Erithrina suberosa.*

The Garos are distributed among the hills forming part of a jungle-covered mountain region about 3,400 square miles in area. Despite the extent of their country, they numbered barely 200,000 souls, and even that figure is only approximate, as it is impossible to take an accurate census. That they have remained beyond the limits of civilization must be ascribed in part to the fact that their hills are reputed to be unhealthy and inaccessible.

Where have the Garos come from? *Uija!* ("I don't know!") I am tempted to write. Round Mymensingh in the south there is a tribe called *Gara* or *Ganching* which was the first to be contacted by the Bengalis. The name of its chief was Garu and legend has it that this Garu led it from Tibet after a long march which lasted years. These exiles preserved their original tongue. This story is probably the source of the name Garo, which is given to the totality of the peoples residing in the western part of the mountains between the Brahmaputra and Pakistan.

The Garos called themselves "Atchik" and most of them never use the word Garo before a foreigner; they prefer "Atchik" and are very proud of their origin.

It is difficult to establish how many centuries have passed since their exodus from the cradle of their remarkable culture, but one version of their wanderings, their arrival in the plains below the Himalayas, their turn to the east up the valley of the Brahmaputra and their final selection of a refuge among the mountains which are their home today, is still extant.

According to this legend, the Garos dwelt in a province of Tibet called *Torua*[1] which they left, for no apparent reason, to seek new homes. Their leaders were Jappa-Jalimpa and Garu. The first place mentioned in the story is Rangamati, in the Goalpara district near Gauripur. Then they tried to settle at Dhubri, where King Dhobani ruled. The latter gave them a warm welcome but got frightened and would not allow them to stay in his territories. The wanderings were resumed and they turned east and arrived at the river Manas.

A cruel and powerful chief of this country was attracted by the great beauty of one of their maidens and tried to kidnap her. All the Garos got together and hid the young virgin in a cave which can still be seen at Jughigoppa, on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. There was a great battle and the Garos were beaten. They were held in captivity for years and their chiefs were sacrificed to the gods of their oppressors.

One day they succeeded in making their escape, crossed the

[1] The present capital of the Garo Hills district is called Tura, in memory of this lost homeland.

Brahmaputra on rafts of banana stalks and settled in the nearest hills on the southern bank. Later on, strong differences of interest and opinion were disclosed and they broke up. Some remained at the base of the hills; the majority made for the jungle.

At this point the legend becomes very obscure, impossible to follow and worthless as a source. The very names which could be identified with those familiar in the plains shed no light on this ancient migration and do not enable us to assign dates. It is easier to assume that the chroniclers of this legend have used their imagination from time to time and put in names with which they were familiar.

But we can accept the fact that there was a tribal migration from the Himalayas to the plains to the south, and also the existence of certain customs and beliefs which can only have originated in the country from which the Garos claim to have come.

Some knowledge of the ethnical geography of the numerous Atchik sub-tribes inhabiting the Garo Hills will help my readers to follow me into the villages and the bush.

The northern section of the mountain area is inhabited by the Awés, who to some extent spill over into the plains on the Kamrup frontier, where they change their name to Akawé, which means "ploughers of the plain". In the north-west we find the Chisaks, who have much in common with the Awés except dress and certain customs. Next, south of the Chisaks, the Duals on the banks of the Someswari have a great reputation as fishermen. Their neighbours are the savage Machis, who inhabit all the valley of the central massif to the west. The Abengs are certainly the most important of the Garo tribes. They occupy all the region west of the Garo Hills and most of the area south of the central mountains and extending to the river Bogaï.

The Chiboks, immediately to the east of the Abengs, inhabit the upper valleys of the Bogaï and are spread out to the river Nataï and the fringes of the Mymensingh plain, It is now Pakistani territory. On the hilltops between the Nitaï and the Someswari live the Ganching tribes, while the Atongs occupy the Someswari valley and the adjacent hills up to Siju.

These numerous divisions are explained in a legend. After their arrival in the hill country, a powerful dynasty of kings from Goalpara again reduced the Atchik people to slavery. Every man was assigned a particular employment and all those engaged in the same employment were separated from their fellows. In a sense the tribe thus became partitioned; the

Abengs became cotton pickers, the Ganchings wood-carvers, the Duals prepared dried fish and the Chisaks collected bamboo shoots for food. Nothing is said about the tribes in the interior. In all probability the Garos themselves were unaware of their existence in the period when this legend became current among the groups inhabiting the surrounding mountains.

After spending a few days in the little jungle capital we have left on foot for the villages in the interior. The Indian "Deputy Commissioner" for the Garo Hills, who represents the New Delhi Government in the autonomous Garo "District Council", was lavish with information and assistance. We have taken five Garo porters with us, volunteers of course, as few professional guides are to be found among these aristocratic tribes.

Our porters will have to share our hard life for some months, sleeping in the open when we cannot find a handy village or establish a base camp. In addition to Peter, who is to be our cook, we have with us a high-class interpreter, B. B. Marak, a Garo of the Marak clan. We call him "B.B." for short, those being the initial letters of his highly complicated Christian names.[1] B.B. once served in the British Indian Army and speaks English very well. He tells us that he is a professor of ethnology. He loves his country and knows it well. Another great virtue in our eyes is that he is a first class shot, an accomplishment we shall badly need if we are to keep our little party fed. Nor must I omit his unequalled skill in extracting liquor from the villages at the right moment.

As for our friend Mukherjee, I can only say that he was very glad to see us again, having persuaded himself that we had certainly been drowned in the Ganges or the Brahmaputra. Our arrival at Tura was twenty days behind our time-table. He is accompanied by his personal servant, Haricharan Das, a Bengali with a most remarkable anatomy, being pathologically thin, without shoulders, hips or calves, and manifestly the product of a social category which has been undernourished for centuries. His patron is as portly as a good Brahmin should be, so between them they represent society as a whole.

On the day we left, Haricharan, to my utter amazement, sported a large crimson sash arranged like a bandolier, and his narrow chest was adorned with a gilded badge with the words "Department of Anthropology, Government of India". Every time we leave one camp for another I shall have to survive the shock of the resplendent Bhabananda Mukherjee's crimson sash!

At Tura we left the Delahaye and our food and other reserves

[1] Bee-Bee, pronounced as in English.

in charge of Captain Sangma and set off, loaded up with our big base-camp tent (which we shall erect when it is impossible to sleep in village houses), two smaller tents for our servants and a large supply of victuals such as rice, tea, processed foods for Naz and myself, powdered milk and meat and vegetable soup. With hunting weapons, cameras and photographic gear, the magnetophone, etc., as well, we have taken on a pretty formidable load.

I have forgotten one of the most important items—Bhabananda Mukherjee's umbrella, that unmistakable symbol ol Anglo-Saxon civilization. It will prove very useful, despite all the hilarity it provoked when we left.

CAMP ALLAGIRI
Among the Abeng tribes

Why the singing?

Because of the *shubitshi*—millet beer—I was told.

While proceeding to install ourselves in a vast house put at our disposal by the nokma Dikkija Sangma,[1] headman of the village of Allagiri, I had time to admire the perfect proportions and traditional dimensions of Garo architecture.

The building we were entering, about two hundred and fifty feet long, was constructed of superb Sâl wood.[2] Mam'ria, the nokma's daughter, was waiting for me on the terrace. The entrance, at ground level, led into the first room, the *nokkra*, adapted as a storeroom for rice mortars, winnowing fans and firewood. The domestic animals slept there at night. Then we mounted a little ladder to the *nokganchi*, a long chamber which is a sort of living-room where the whole family meet their friends on fête days. This room, which had been assigned to us, was divided into well defined sections. Next to the door, on one of the high beams, was the place reserved for the spirits where sacrifices are offered to the numerous Atchik gods on occasions when custom forbids celebration out of doors. This place is called *maljuri*. In the centre, close to another beam, were arrayed the jars of rice spirit and millet beer for current consumption.

Mam'ria drew my attention to the fireplace, an ingenious affair designed to prevent fire. Its construction calls for quite special care; a small platform of soil protects the floor and a bamboo screen is fixed one metre above it to prevent the sparks

[1] Dikkija is the nokma's first name. *Dik*—swarm; *Ki*—breed; *ja*—not, i.e. something which is not found in quantity, and can be translated as "unique". Sangma is the clan name.

[2] *Shorea robusta.*

from flying and provide a place where the venison can be smoked. There is no chimney in a Garo house and the smoke gets away where it can. It may make European eyes run, but serves several useful purposes—keeping mosquitoes and sand fleas away and, by depositing antiseptic creosote on the thatch and bamboo, preserving them and keeping them free of mites and a large number of other insects.

In a few moments all the women of the house were crowding round me. My slacks and short hair intrigued them greatly and I did not fully realize why they were so curious until they started placing their hands on my bust, which naturally made me join in their laughter. In their country, where the social structure is matriarchal, the woman, head of the clan, is omnipotent. The grandmother, next to whom I was asked to sit, has given her name to almost all the vigorous generations I have already met since I arrived in the village. She has had the privilege of teaching the members of her clan the laws of the Garos, the sacred words of the great national epics and the ritual chants.

As a woman, and the leader of a nice little party of men, I think I enjoy a regard and respect which will prove very useful to me. I have no difficulty in reciprocating, as the friendship thus offered is unaffected, disinterested and generous to a degree long forgotten elsewhere.

Outside the house there was no pause in the continuous polyphonic chanting, in the fine Garo tongue, of the simple ever-recurring melodies, with their alternation of solo and chorus. I went out to get closer and found Naz and B.B. Marak sitting among a group of natives, drinking and smoking the water pipe which is made from a long bamboo. Both seemed to me at the top of their form.

"When I wanted to bring away the three wild chickens the sahib killed in the forest, I wasn't allowed to!" Peter remarked with a mysterious air.

"Why?"

"It seems that before you can eat them you must perform some customary rites, no doubt to appease the spirits of the game and consecrate the shoot."

As I was extremely hungry, I went up to the singers and gave Naz a shake to make him come to. But he only signalled me to keep quiet and the nokma made me sit next to him. The voices were too loud for me to hear what he was saying, but it was wonderful to listen to them, now a full throated male chorus, now a sudden silence, now a sustained *mezzo voce* to a flute obligato

and now drowned in the roll of tam-tams. Maracas made of gourds filled with gravel kept up their strange rattle.

I was given two bamboos filled with millet beer and emptied them one after the other. It was the first time that I had drunk from such a vessel. But it is not the container that matters! In these parts the latter is a hollow bamboo, thirty centimetres long and holding as much as a big beer mug. This rice or millet beer plays an important part in the life of the Garos. It is made by fermentation, not by distillation. We drink it without hesitation, for though its bitter-sweet taste is curious and somewhat unpleasant at first one soon gets used to it. Many a time after a long and exhausting march have I hailed with deligh the appearance of the jar of honour proffered by the nokma. A drop of alcohol is a wonderful restorative after a day of mountain roads!

This beer can be made from rice and millet and even maize, but is always prepared in the same way. When the grains selected have been boiled until all the water has evaporated they are laid out to cool on bamboo mats and sprinkled with a handful of *wanti* fermenting powder. After half an hour they are put in a *dika*, a big earthenware pot which is filled with water and covered with a cloth. When only a small quantity of beer is to be made the grains and water are placed in a large dried gourd. The fermenting agent is a mixture of *sarrat*[1] leaves, pimentos and sugar cane to which the fruit of the *kimka*[2] is added.

For cooking fowls the women use some twenty red pimentos—they are as necessary as sweet potatoes and pieces of ginger root—and the resulting stew is most exciting. No Indian curry was ever hotter!

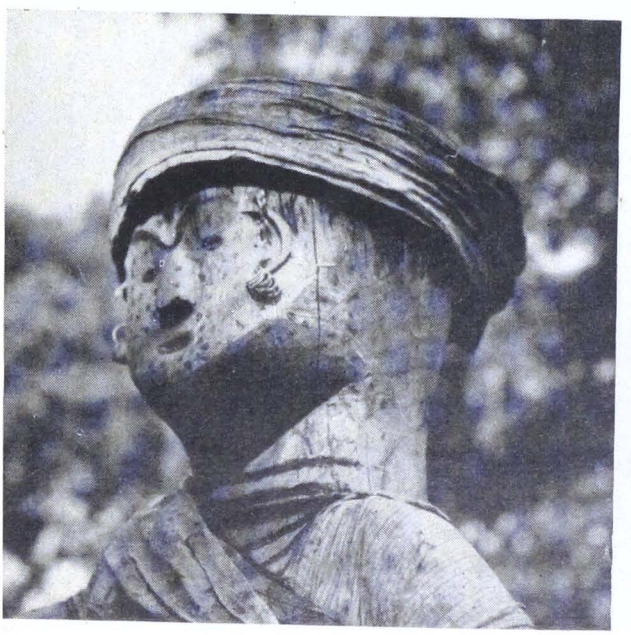
One evening the *nokpanthé* held a celebration in our honour. The nokpanthé, called ethnologically "The House of the Men", is the most subtle of primitive institutions, a sort of club where the bachelors live and sleep. The boys leave the maternal home at six or seven years old and go to the nokpanthé where the older men teach them the fundamental rules of Garo communal life.

This occasion is marked by a species of sacrifice in honour of the guardian spirits of the clan to which the boy belongs. The first phase is the interpretation of the auguries in the entrails of a chicken to see if the boy is ripe for entry into the men's house, e.g. whether he is any the worse for the ailments of infancy, and things of that kind.

This method of reading the auguries has links with things

[1] *Asplesium esculentum.*
[2] *Solanum indicum.*

The cotton market



(*Above*) Garo houses, one on the ground, the other in the trees

(*Left*) *Kima*—a mortuary monument

very distant in time and space such as the Roman *aruspices*, who also used the entrails. In Rome it is probable that the subject of study was the contractions of the liver; but I have not solved the mystery among the Garos.

This celebration of a boy's promotion to the nokpanthé from his mother's house is usually followed by the sacrifice of a little black pig, not to mention eating and drinking.

The nokpanthé appears to be a sort of economic, social, religious and political centre where daily life is governed by the comings and goings of the men and what they decide to do when not busy in the fields or markets, or out hunting, or engaged in clearing the ground for new *rays*.[1]

When a Garo marries he goes to live in his wife's home, which quite frequently is in another village some distance away. His childhood home, belonging to his mother, has probably become the rightful property of one of his sisters and her husband, as only women can inherit the houses and lands where they were born. The man is not to be pitied, however. Whenever the pattern of domestic bliss does not come up to his idea of it he can go off to find company, talk, amusement and a bed in the bachelors' establishment. He will get a masculine camaraderie not unmixed with practical jokes and horseplay, and even the opportunity for affairs with unmarried girls.

But the latter must be careful! Women are strictlyforbidden to enter the nokpanthé. Woe to anyone going too near it, whether by accident or design. She may be captured and roughly handled. In any event it is a great disgrace for a woman to be seen near the men's club. She is punished and has to pay all the expenses of a purification ceremony and the cost of a sacrificial altar dedicated to Susimé, the moon goddess of sexual relations.

When a man becomes a widower he is obliged to live in the nokpanthé until he marries again. During that period his children are in charge of the maternal relations who also prepare his food. All this is governed by rigid regulations of which I shall have something to say later on.

I was taken into the nokpanthé the first evening. All the men got up to greet me and there was a good deal of laughter. In the village the women hung round the doors, covering their faces with their hands to conceal their mocking smiles.

When I came out I had to pay for my visit. The evil spirits of the village might have been very angry with me. I was made to sit in the shade of the nokpanthé where I passed a whole hour

[1] Ploughland over areas newly burnt.

in humble penitence, eyes glued to the ground and praying that heaven, the weather and all the powers of nature would take pity on me and look after me. Everything else was in the hands of the *kamal*,[1] the sole link between mankind and the magical, dubious and much-feared world of the spirits. Two fowls, for which I had to pay, were sacrificed and then another round of drink restored everyone's spirits.

I slept very late because my slumbers were disturbed by the singing which went on until dawn.

I anticipated a repetition of the programme the following evening. The nokma's daughter is to be married in a few days' time and her father has given her a fine new house which had still to be roofed. In accordance with the prescribed system of mutual assistance, *baras* in Garo, the whole village was afoot at daybreak. There would be no work in the fields, for it was essential that the roof should be finished in one day.

The old men sat around in the shade of a big banyan tree, splitting bamboos into those slender stalks which hold the thatch or bamboo leaves together and are regarded as indispensable for the construction of a roof capable of surviving two or three monsoons. The fiancée and her friends brought up the huge loads of fresh and dried leaves which are laid, in separate and contrasting layers, on the framework of the roof. Ten muscular youths, seated astride the ridge of the roof, seemed to be enjoying themselves, chatting together and joking with friends handing them the bundles.

In the clearing which marks the centre of the village (the Garos called it *atela*) and is the scene of all the religious ceremonies and cremations, the women were bustling about, preparing a meal for the workers and the liquor to be drunk at sundown.

The roof was completed before dusk and the fête then began. The whole village was invited to the new house. The men lined up against the wall of the main room or crowded around the fireplaces where the liquor jars were hanging. Many of them took to dancing and singing. The spectators joined in to make a chorus of the last words which were usually *Ka!* or *Kai!* meaning "come and join us", a sort of exhortation to the spirits to regard themselves as guests, and also a hint that they can round off the work of the builders!

Mam'ria, the fiancée, was busy with the pots and serving

[1] The kamal is the village priest and tribal sorcerer (a non-hereditary office); someone with an outstanding memory for the interminable incantations to the genii, or a special gift for divination, is selected for the post.

pieces of the sacrificial goat, wrapped in banana leaves, to her guests, who ate them reverently, and everyone joined in the singing and dancing under the fine new roof.

Of course we were invited, and there was great competition to keep us drinking. The men themselves put the bamboos to our lips when our turn came round. B.B. Marak was extremely anxious that I should get drunk and plied me with liquor from the top of the jars.

"Your life is precious," he assured me, "because you are our friend. Do you know that in the Garo country, when a fête day is ending the dead sometimes take the form of a tiger and return to devour the living? They're the dead who have been neglected and want their revenge. You must pacify these lost souls by drinking lots of rice and millet spirit in their honour."

The warmth of all the fires in the house and the presence of so many men encouraged the singers to even greater efforts. There must have been a party of forty or so, yet there was no unpleasant human odour, as the Garo are extremely clean and bathe twice a day, at dawn and sunset.

When the Atchik tribe came down from the snowy heights of the Himalayas, they traversed the plains and came to the refreshing waters of the Brahmaputra in which, to their astonishment, they discovered the delights of bathing. That discovery was transmitted to their descendants, which accounts for the fact that Garo villages and houses are never found far from water courses.

The priest, brandishing his big *mylam*, the Garo sacrificial knife, raised his voice amongst the smoke from fires and pipes:

"May our gongs and drums be in tune with those of our neighbours and our actions conform to our ancient customs. *Ka Marak! Ka Sangma!*" (Marak clan. Sangma clan).[1]

The words reveal one of the best aspects of Garo good sense, the idea of equilibrium—harmony between the individual and the community in which he lives: everything subordinated to a sense of moderation and horror of excess.

The men of our escort beat little drums, the rhythm being relayed from time to time by shrill-toned flutes. The aged sorcerer, with his historic Ming chignon and gestures as vigorous, vivid and vitrified as if they were copied from an ancient Tibetan vase, continued his occult incantation. The longer one looked at him the nearer one got to the idea that his outward appearance was that of something about to vanish in smoke. But so far from vanishing, he came up and sat next to me and gave me a long and intent stare, as if he were surprised

[1] All the villages belong to one or other of these two clans.

to see me there. His eyes seemed to be the window of his brain; they were eyes of long, long ago, the eyes of a race which remembers having spoken face to face with the gods.

Listening to the wind sweeping over the jungle and the rice-fields, I was absorbed in watching the fires and the women constantly piling on wood so that they could cook rice and roast fowls. From time to time they glanced my way and gave me a friendly smile. By now I was one of them.

Now came the turn of Mam'ria's happy lover to sing the hymn of consecration of the house:

Atjo anga atjo! Imma anga imma!
Hear me, hear my words!
Joy! My house is built, my roof is finished!
As the father of Samé lived in his house,
As the mother of Mumé lived off the field and the forest,
So I too have my shield and my shade . . .

The "shield" and "shade" are the roof and shade of the new house.

In my turn I plough the fields,
Now I too live in the village,
I have my home.
Just like my father with the muni *of Nimba,*
Just like my grandfather
With the chambouri *of Jonja in days long ago.*

"Muni" and "chambouri" are the names of a plant which induces sleep and in which the Garos firmly believe. Here, no doubt, the allusion is to the peace and quiet which await a man at his own fireside at the end of the day. Nimba and Jonja are the names of this plant's guardian spirit.

"*As they played with the plants and waved them about,*" the young man continued.

When the Garos dance they generally carry bunches of leaves or cock feathers and wave them about. Here the singer is alluding to dancing in that fashion and saying that he intends to follow the example of his forebears:

"*That the place I have chosen for the building of my house*
shall have the blessing of the spirits.
The place where I and my friends shall dwell . . ."

Ang kinté, nokap na! . . . Ang kinté, bipana!

"Kinté" is the bit of ground on which the new house is built. The singer went on to invoke the gods who protect domestic felicity.

At that point of the proceedings the kamal sacrificed a cock and offered it to the spirit of the house. He sprinkled the walls with fresh blood, mixed with rice flour, and then stuck little feathers from the bird into the stains.

"*As I place the sacrificial cock's little feathers in the blood,*" he intoned, "*so shall this house enter the heart of the guardian deities.*"

He pressed his hands into the wet mixture and then flattened them against the walls and beams in various places, producing a series of odd arabesques.

"*And now I dwell in the village,*" the new owner continued, imitating the action of the kamal.

This house is mine.
I tend the fields of my ancestors,
I have a wife and a house. . . .

How difficult all the native phraseology is to translate! The elementary simplicity of the words conveys so much more than even the most elaborate modern vocabulary, for we have lost that first of all languages, the language of symbols.

The characteristic feature of the Tibeto-Burmese languages, to which the Garo tongue is related, is that they can only express concrete ideas; they cannot convey abstractions or lofty ideas. This peculiarity has had a considerable influence on the psychology of these peoples, forming their minds on objective rather than on theoretical lines—the usual primitive mentality. So in their poems and incantations we note the care taken to relate a group of syllables and sounds to a particular aspect of the universe—the primary function of any language.

The gongs sounded and the cymbals clashed. The women went off to fetch the Jews harp[1] and the young men brought in the big *dama*, drums emitting most melodious sounds when skilful fingers tap the skins stretched across the open ends of the long body made of the resonant *gambil*[2] wood. These drums beat out a rhythm, now fast, now slow, now loud, now soft, which will become very familiar to us.

All the clans have their private and particular poems of their own composition, to the stock of which they are always adding. But in addition they have a number of magical hymns of great antiquity which have been transmitted down the centuries from generation to generation and must have been the bequest of immortal bards of ancient days.

Throughout Asia music and poetry are one, and always have

[1] Known to the Garo, but instead of being iron it is made of bamboo, cut into strips 30 centimetres long and 1.5 centimetres wide.

[2] *Careya arborica.*

been. A man fits any words that his feelings may prompt into the same age-old melodies, melodies to which the West produced nothing similar until the end of the tenth century.

More and more liquor was handed round and the house became extremely noisy. The chanting was resumed and the women collected to dance round the central fire, crowding together and taking little rhythmical steps. The lances were stacked together and piled in the doorway so that no wild beast or evil spirit could enter. Night's terrors were forgotten.

I kept on drinking to please my hostesses, though my head was in a whirl. It would have been bad manners to acknowledge defeat, and if I had done so I should have lost their goodwill for ever.

B.B. Marak and Jean Naz did their share nobly and laughed like maniacs. From time to time my colleague asked me if I wanted to go home but I indignantly rejected the idea.

"You don't seem to realize the ethnographical interest of this evening!"

I accepted a further bamboo offered by Mam'ria. Life seemed utterly splendid! What time was it? Midnight? One o'clock? Two or three? What did it matter? Time means nothing to the Garos, who have no idea how to measure it. Had I not come to this part of the world to forget it!

The men went on drinking. Jean Naz rose and beckoned me to follow him. But why? I was so nice and warm! I began to think I was drunk.

The clamour of tam-tams, gongs and flutes gradually died away and the house grew dark. My friend was right; I must go home. We were dragged away by the nokma and B.B. who were singing at the top of their voices:

Aunara chidypo jyljo,
Houk bandoa!

It was the song of the pig, the tribal taboo.

"*I know a pool of mud where I can wallow.*"
Houk bandoa.

Jean and I followed them, shouting "Houk bandoa".

We found the village fast asleep in the cold night. But beyond the last houses a roebuck barked and an uneasy stag spasmodically relieved its feelings with a sharp cry.

"*My hair grows like bristles,*
But is lustrous when I comb it."

Houk bandoa! we continued, whilst the villagers living

furthest away were returning home, clutching their long and slender teak lances. They could easily have run straight into a tiger and in such an emergency a lance could be very useful, especially in the hands of a man inspired by too much liquor.

Back at our night quarters and groping for the camp beds which Peter had put up for us, I nearly fell over Mukherjee's, but he only turned over and grunted in his sleep.

I fell asleep thinking of the fête, the music, the singing and dancing which for a brief space had obliterated all feelings except riotous happiness.

Same Camp.

B.B. Marak is a delightful companion. We have been out hunting together and practically every day we get fine bags of rabbits, roebuck and wild fowl, which are every bit as tasty as pheasant. Our enterprise is not popular with Mukherjee who will not come with us for the excellent reason that he is mortally afraid of the jungle. The moment the sun goes down he retires to a corner with a lamp and some sort of book. His servant, poor Haricharan, is quite as frightened as his master, whose simple meal he prepares as fast as he can before going off to swathe himself in a blanket somewhere at the back of the house. Being Indians, they share the majority of their countrymen's dislike of the jungle. Both of them are quite amazed at our enthusiasm for wandering off, climbing hills and tasting all the pleasures of this enchanted world.

As for the Garos in our service, they make no secret of their approval. We have the same food and live exactly as they do and they like us for it and go to quite a lot of trouble to provide entertainment. There is plenty of opportunity! Our arrival in the Hills has coincided with the germination festivals. These last more than a month and not an evening passes without one clan inviting another to its village. As a matter of fact, there is not much to be done in the fields before harvest, apart from mounting guard in the *borang*, the tree huts from which the Garo keep watch over their fields to prevent damage from prowling animals. One can see a peasant in these miradors at any hour of the day or night and hear him driving these pests away with loud blasts on a horn or violent drumming on a tam-tam.

We often surprise villagers in the midst of their junketings which, as I have said previously, usually take place at night. The natives sleep from sunrise to midday when there is no special work in hand, the harvest has been got in or the new ray has been cut.

Within a thirty mile range of our camp there are some fifteen scattered villages and though they are sparsely populated their comparative proximity has given us a wide field for investigation. We have won the confidence of the natives by our simplicity, cheerfulness and sporting proclivities, so that we do not have to be shy about asking any sort of question about their way of life. Despite the great monthly markets where so many Garos go to sell their crops during the dry season, and notwithstanding their contact with the Assamese and Bengalis of the plains—what I call "corrugated iron civilization"—they have remained primitive in their mental outlook and their grasp of life and its phenomena.

Same camp.

The animated stirrings of village life woke us early this morning. Jean Naz and Peter were soon busy in the kitchen. It is Jean's job to see that the camp functions smoothly, and in particular to arrange the water fatigue. Of course our porters do the actual fetching and carrying, but we often have to lend a hand as lots of fun is to be had down by the river, especially when the girls are bathing!

One morning I was told by Darong,[1] one of our best guides, that a rogue elephant was abroad and had been doing a lot of damage for three or four years. It was easy to recognize because the point of one of its tusks was turned down.

Summoning our party and the men from the village, we made a tour of the barns where the paddy of which elephants are very fond is stored.

In early times Garo villages were very large, often comprising two or three hundred houses. This was because of the risk of attacks by neighbouring tribes. The Garos also surrounded their villages with *chevaux de frises* of pointed bamboo stakes and wooden palisades called *wamisi*. Nowadays, the inhabitants have less fear of their neighbours, particularly as the jungle villages are very far apart. But the old defences continue to be very useful against wild elephants. No doubt an elephant could beat the bamboos down, but they would make a noise when they broke, if they were not too soft.

Tonight the villagers will be on watch with paraffin lamps and torches of rice straw. My men will certainly not be *de trop*.

Returning to Dikkija Sangma's house, we found it full of men and women. They had all brought woven materials and basketwork, having heard that I like such things. What must we give them in exchange? Should we get away with our beads,

[1] Darong: literally "mountain goat".

the multicoloured beads carefully chosen in the rue Vielle-du-Temple in Paris, where we were told that these were exactly what the Siamese and Burmese natives liked. A sigh of disappointment went up when Jean Naz appeared with the little green, yellow, red and blue cardboard boxes. The Garos brought out their splendid pearls, derived from certain Brahmaputra shellfish and worth a great deal of money on the market. My discomfited companion hastily withdrew with his wares. Our friends had better taste than we thought! To save our faces, I produced some Calcutta cottons in startling colours; but even these met with little success.

Then I told them that I came from a country further away than the Brahmaputra or even the legendary Himalayas from which they claimed to have come, a country so far away that in my case they could withdraw their taboos without any risk. I explained that I was not an ordinary trader, but was travelling in the hills to study the practices and customs of their race and knew that the Garos preserved many ancient traditions of which they were very proud. But the assembly merely gaped at me and I thought the game was up when the nokma began to speak. He merely repeated what I had said, however, and his mounting vehemence and eloquence stifled the incipient mockery till at length a young girl came forward and laid her hamper of paddy and several little baskets at my feet. I promptly produced my own treasures—two tiger claws!

I knew this would make a tremendous impression as tiger claws endow their owners with strength and cunning. The assembled company laughed happily and looked at me hopefully, but unfortunately I had no others. I had to explain that having given away what I valued most to the girl who had been first to offer me a present, I had nothing left but dress materials and toilet preparations. There was such a crowd in the house that it was supper time before I had finished distributing all my gifts. In exchange we found ourselves richer by a number of small objects, most of them of little value, though some were unique of their kind—carved spears, blankets made of tree bark painted in tribal colours, the heads of toucans, a variety of roots, wild honey and *taa*[1] root. This last, the symbol of friendship and high regard, was a supreme compliment from my hostess.

The night was about to yield to the first mist of morning when I was awoken by a creaking noise. My drowsy thoughts turned spontaneously to the wild elephant, but it was only B.B. Marak getting out of bed. I wondered why the boards should be so noisy.

[1] The jungle arum lily.

I tried to get up and fell back with a groan. Anyone would think I must have been knocked out. I called out. Jean and Marak came to my help, accompanied by the nokma who at once pronounced that I was suffering from a very uncommon variety of malaria, a gift from sand fleas which infest river banks.

For three days I was unable to move, but had the compensation of a visit from a blind old sorcerer who was brought by his son and said he was anxious for a talk with me. With B.B. Marak as interpreter, we spent several hours in a most exciting discussion of the most intricate problems of magic and religion. The old man treated me as an expert, if not a colleague. To him I owe my recovery, after allowing for a potion made from mysterious plants. He told me that this medicine, and the courage he had given me during our talk, would enable me to get up as sound as a bell next morning.

Inspired by the story of my travels to think that I must have an exceptionally strong constitution, he gave me so big a dose that I was delirious all night and had the craziest dreams.

When I woke at dawn in a state of perfect bliss, I found quite a crowd gathered round the bed. But I was not allowed to get up, as the ritual of treatment had not been completed.

"The blind sorcerer," said Marak, "is amazed at your power of resistance to the potion and wants to have a lock of your hair to give him a little of your strength."

The Garos actually believe that the hair has magical powers. In earlier times, when they cut off an enemy's head they always preserved the scalp most carefully so that they could absorb the dead man's physical vigour.

I felt so happy and well that I could hardly refuse and the operation was carried out in the traditional way. But I will admit that I was far from comfortable when the big mylam was produced and proceeded to hack at my locks, tangled as they were. When this performance was over I tried to get up. In vain; my legs gave way under me and I fell back on the bed in a sort of faint.

I thought I was losing face, but I was quite wrong. My friends looked delighted and it was just as well because I felt an overwhelming desire to burst out laughing. Marak explained that I was still feeling the effects of the magic herbs and the potion, which I suspect contained a big ration of hasheesh.

But this was not the end. The nokma insisted that the sorcerer should read the auguries as to the further course of my recovery and the old man had recourse to the system of divination called *pongsinima.*

The kamal had produced a big jar of cold water and throughout the ceremony I had to keep my hands immersed. He now took a bow to which he fastened a slender bamboo stick with a piece of cotton thread. One end of this thread hung down from the bow and rested on my body. The sorcerer raised the bow by the string, holding it between the thumb and first finger of his right hand and supporting his wrist with his left hand. There was a recital of a long list of gods with cosmic names. And then, after a quarter of an hour of litanies, the bow began to quiver, at the very moment when the sorcerer uttered the name of the god to whom sacrifice must be made.

All was well. The god had answered. A fowl was sacrificed on the spot. The evil spirit which had possessed me had fled. I was cured!

II

The future life will be the repetition of life on earth, except that everyone will stay young, disease and death will be unknown and no one will marry or be given in marriage.

Andaman myth, from E. H. Mann, *On the Original Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands*, London, 1883.

THE Garo people is divided into clans, groups of families who regard themselves as related through women and trace their origin from a common ancestor, either a mythological figure or some animal around which a legend has gathered.

There are three great exogamous clans among the Garos, the Momins, the Sangmas and the Maraks. The Momins belong exclusively to the Awé tribe, while the two other clans are distributed among all the tribes, even if they differ among themselves. The Garo word for these clans is *katchi*. Members of the same katchi cannot marry and the children always belong to the mother's clan. A Sangma must marry a Momin or Marak girl and the children will not be Sangmas but Momins or Maraks. Yet the essence of the Garo exogamy is not the katchi, but the *matchong*, or maternal line, of which there are a considerable number.

At first these laws are difficult to grasp. It might be thought that in practice they would work out as an accumulation of fragmentary vestiges traceable to a few racial fancies or idiosyncrasies, but in fact, the primitive laws are so coherent and logical that as soon as one begins to set them out and classify

them, even as roughly as I have done in my brief notes, one can make out the principles which have governed both their inception and development. It then becomes clear that those principles are essentially rational, however ignorant the men who devised them. As among all tribes living under the same laws, the Garo exogamy is the sole means of maintaining the group by preserving the purity of the blood while avoiding the fragmentation which would follow consanguineous marriages, a very common phenomenon on the village and clan plane, where primitive life is so promiscuous.

"The law of exogamy governs the group at all points and all times. It is based on the values—the women—which are the values *par excellence* both from the biological and social point of view, and without which life is not possible, or at any rate is reduced to the worst forms of degradation."[1]

The origin of the katchi is probably totemic, though a totem history cannot explain a whole clan. Some of the Garos say that originally they were all Momins and that the other exogamous groups were formed by members who quarrelled and then separated from the original group to make new homes elsewhere.

The origin of the matchongs is easier to trace as it is totemic. In some cases it is based on some popular folk tale; in others the maternal descendants have simply adopted the name of a river or hill where they settled. So entire families have "swarmed", forming new communities and taking a new name to differentiate themselves from the stock from which they came. There is also a sort of modified totemism among the Garos, as it may often happen that the matchong proclaims descent from some animal and yet that animal is regarded with no respect whatever by the clan adopting it.

One of the Marak totems is a bear. The folk tale runs as follows. "One day a bear came out of the jungle carrying a basket full of good eatables. It met two women of the Momin and Sangma katchis who asked it the price of its wares. The animal replied: 'I would not sell them for gold or silver or even for precious barley. Only for a woman would I part with them!' Neither of the two women would marry him and he went on his way until he met a lovely girl of the Marak clan. She was willing to pay his price and they married. Of this union a child was born. All the descendants of that matchong have the bear as their totem, for they are all the children of the bear."

The Marak *Drok-Grè* matchong have a fowl as their totem because their ancestors had a marvellous ornament in their

[1] *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

dancing head-dress and the ornament made a clucking sound like a hen. In the Garo tongue that clucking is represented by the sounds "drok-drok!" So all the descendants have called their matchong the Drok-Grè.

The totem of the Sangma *Kok* katchi is a basket. Here again a legend supplies the explanation:

"One of the grandmothers in the clan was an old woman who was so rich that she would never walk, so she had herself carried about in a big basket called a kok."

One also finds matchong names taken from rivers or various geographical features of the country. Such are the *Dô-bakkol* and *Wasra* matchongs. The former gets its name from the "Bats Grotto" near Baghmara, the latter from the river Wasra, on the banks of which it has its home.

The social structure of the Garos is the principal object of our investigation so we spend the greater part of the cool mornings in the *bandasal* (the house in which passing travellers are received) questioning the natives who come to see us every day from the villages around.

To them it is all very simple—no problem at all, but we find ourselves faced with a complex of very remarkable laws, admirably integrated but still a puzzle to ethnologists. To Mukherjee, who has come specially from Calcutta to study them, they are a constant headache. Any knowledge I possess I owe to the many examples he has given me—the only way he can make them comprehensible.

"Quite recently," he explained, "a woman died in this village leaving all her property to her daughter. The latter has also died, leaving a husband but no child. The husband cannot inherit his wife's property."

"Why not?"

"Because there is a Garo law that relations of the deceased shall find him another wife of their matchong. The second wife will take the dead wife's goods."

"What happens if the wife betrays her husband and there is a divorce?"

"She is very severely punished," replied Marak, bursting out laughing. "All her property is confiscated. The husband will do well out of it. They will choose him another wife from the first wife's matchong—just as if he were a widower—and he will continue to enjoy his faithless spouse's belongings."

"So taking things all round, there's something to be said for being a man among the Garos," interjected Naz.

Yet despite all the relevant regulations, the husband gets the

full benefit of all his wife's property during his life even though he cannot inherit. He cannot dispose of it, but his decisions as to how it shall be used are never questioned. If there had been a lawsuit in the first case I cited, the claims of the first wife's matchong would have been invoked and have prevailed. But there was no trouble; the man married again without any difficulty and continued to manage the lands and goods he had received on the day of his marriage with his first wife.

"It just shows the importance of picking the right girl at the start," said Naz.

"But the man never chooses," replied B.B. "He is always chosen."

"Not even the first time?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed our Brahmin emphatically. He was thoroughly enjoying the conversation. "It is always the girl who proposes. In one case only is the marriage automatic. If a girl has a cousin who is a son of a sister of her father she *must* marry him, though this rule only applies to her if she is the heiress. In default of any such cousin she must marry a man in the same position in the paternal line."

"These laws are much more far-reaching than you would think," said Dikkija Sangma with a subtle smile. He was always present when we were interrogating villagers and made himself very useful, as they did not always understand where our questions were leading.

"If I've got it right," I observed to Mukherjee, "woman is not as omnipotent as I thought when we first came here. What I mean is that matriarchy, in the true sense of the word, does not exist among the Garos."

At this point B.B., who had not grasped the exact purport of our conversation, burst in as if we had been guilty of blasphemy: "But woman is everything here! Is she not the sole channel through which property passes from one generation to another, just like life itself?"

Dikkija, slower off the mark than our interpreter, felt that there was a flaw in our reasoning and asked Marak to let him continue his explanation.

"The nokma is going to tell you something important about the supervisory powers of the man's matchong over property which his wife has brought him."

"I would like to tell you about the *nokrom*, one of our cleverest customs," Dikkija resumed. "The husband's matchong has automatic control over the wife's property from the first day of the marriage, and to prevent that control being lost, in the case of the husband's death for example, the latter has the

right to appoint a man of his clan to represent him. This man, called the nokrom, is not an heir, since there can be no question of a male inheriting, and in any event the man whose nokrom he is, has nothing to leave, but he is the channel through which the husband's family maintains its hold over the wife's property. Whenever possible, the nokrom is the son of the husband's sister: he must marry the nokna, his uncle's daughter and also the widow if she survives her husband."

Here the nokma was interrupted by a complimentary whistle from Naz. I could see he was beginning to understand.

"In a word," he said, "he becomes his wife's father-in-law!"

"Exactly! In that way the property the wife will inherit will remain under the control of the husband's clan."

"Hypergamy," whispered Mukherjee sententiously, taking care not to be heard by Marak, who might regard the word as an insult. But the latter went on translating the nokma's further explanation that the nokrom is considered the support of his wife's family after the death of the male ancestor of the matchong. Hence the meaning of the word itself, for *nok*= "house" and *krong*="pillar". It could be said that after the appointment of the nokrom there is a dual control of all the property, though the wife's matchong naturally has the last word.

There was another point which seemed to interest Naz.

"What happens when the husband is unfaithful?"

"*So'mal*[1]*!*" cried B.B. "It is an awful crime! The man stands condemned in the eyes of the whole tribe and the penalty of decapitation by the mylam is still in vogue. So anyone thinks twice before committing it!"

My comrade remained lost in thought for a moment and then sarcastically remarked:

"So the woman merely loses her property, while the man loses his life."

"It's not quite like that. If the woman with whom he has sinned belongs to a different katchi from his, any child resulting from the union must be saved, to comply with the laws of exogamy. The woman becomes *taboo*, whether married or not, and her ears are torn and she can never again sport those silver ornaments which are the pride of Garo women. If the law of the clans has been violated the woman is put to death. But that sort of thing seldom happens amongst us."

The Garo have a great respect for women in general. They are the "jewel of the tribe", the "lotus on the village pond",

[1] Adultery. There is another Garo word, *amita*, for it, which specifically implies that a charge of adultery has been made.

"silver fish in the river". No doubt they enjoy many rights, but they also have the greatest of duties, the duty to give birth to strapping boys and healthy and sensible girls, and bring them up as the noble descendants of a proud race so that the country shall remain strong and the laws continue to be observed.

It may be said that marriage among the Garos is governed by two important laws—exogamy and *akim*. Exogamy means that marriage is not allowed between two members of the same clan, still less if they have a common maternal line. Such marriages involve two sins, *balkdong* and *asimal*, both of which are considered incestuous and very serious crimes.

Under the law known as akim neither husband nor wife recovers freedom of action, even after divorce or the death or desertion of the other partner. The *mahari* from which the first partner has been selected has the duty of finding the second and the surviving spouse has the duty of accepting the new choice.

The mahari is a sort of family council and special guardian of these laws. Its authority is paramount in matters of marriage and it is usually obeyed. It concerns itself with the affairs of all of its members. It sees that an inheritance passes to the proper heir, undertakes the defence of members and puts them in funds if they are unable to pay their debts or meet current expenses. It protects the rights of the nokna and supplies children for adoption by those resorting to the system of adoption which the Garos call *deragatani*. It makes certain that the nokna marries a nokrom whose selection has been determined in strict accordance with custom.

In short, it is the duty of the mahari to find wives for the men and husbands for the women under its control.

The mahari comprises approximately all the families belonging to the same matchong or bearing the same name, though individuals as such have no personal obligation to each other. It is divided into two sub-groups each of which debates and decides the disputes assigned to it in the name and with the authority of the whole mahari. One group is made up of all the eldest brothers and the brothers, maternal and great uncles of all the women and is responsible for everything relating to the religious, civil and criminal laws and the observance of the codes of marriage and inheritance. Its functions as a family tribunal are confined to safeguarding the rights of the women. The other sub-group comprises the husbands of the sisters, their aunts, who are assisted by their husbands, and the two grandfathers. It is concerned with the interests of the men. It must be remembered that even if a man leaves his home he remains a member of the family all his life, and even after his death.

We have been only three weeks at Allagiri and already we can count our friends by thousands for miles and miles around.

As soon as the sun is up—when our menfolk go off to shoot pigeons or doves, our favourite dish for breakfast—I go down to the village to make certain that I am not missing anything. One woman sets aside the day's paddy ration, another weaves the indigo-dyed cotton and children play with puppies, the only toys they ever possess before being drawn into the practical life of the tribe and realizing that they have to play their part.

The weather has been delightful, as it is the height of the dry season. The wind may shake the jungle all night but the dawn brings utter peace. I shall never forget the wonderful days I have spent here in the Garo Hills, or our visits to villages hidden in the bamboos or the frugal meals taken on the banks of the river with Marak and Peter, the latter somewhat astonished and occasionally alarmed at the sort of life we make him lead. Victim of the malaria haunting these hills, and mystified by the superstitions of the world around us, he is missing, I fear, the fine streets and neon lights of Goa!

Despite the comparative modesty of our daily excursions, six to eight miles on an average, we find that we get tired at night and quite often a bearer goes down with fever and has to take to his bed. But Naz is indefatigable, despite frequent attacks, thanks to his long years of residence in the bush in Indo-China.

Today the presence of a tiger was reported. While my colleague was arranging a battue and the porters went off to the village of Singbandagiri, two or three kilometres away, to fetch hunting elephants, I thought I would investigate a family living in one of the houses where there seemed to be a lot of women.

The lucky male in this house happens to be one of our porters whom we call the "Piper", because of his amazing skill in extracting all the sounds of the forest from little pipes made out of leaves. These pipes are a great snare for wild animals, whose cries they imitate. The "Piper" is naturally one of our best hunters.

Marak tells me he has several wives but cannot properly be called a polygamist.

I know of two of them. He is a nokrom and has had to marry his uncle's widow after previously marrying the daughter. He has two or three other beauties in his hut. His principal wife, the eldest, calls them his nieces or daughters.

"They are his wives too," B.B. told me, "but his relations with them are different, and are often what you might call compulsory."

It was only after exhaustive inquiry that I came to understand the position. B.B. was right. There was no question of a plurality of marriage in the ordinary sense. It was a case of a special sort of polygamy which is permitted in certain well-defined circumstances, e.g. when a man is a nokrom, or the first wife is getting too old or falls ill or is sterile, or the estate is too big to manage.

Even polygamy of this kind is subject to very strict rules, as if taken too far it would have very serious consequences for the life of the group. If too many young girls were withdrawn from the general stock of eligible females, there would be a mischievous disparity between the number of young men and that of girls of marriageable age.

Before a Garo can take a second wife he is compelled to get the consent of the first wife, who remains omnipotent within the group. A man may marry two sisters but he must marry the elder first. If he breaks this rule he must pay legal compensation. The second wife's clan may not be the same as the first's, though usually both are from the same clan and matchong. These secondary wives are of a younger generation and are not necessarily employed about the house, a province reserved to the first wife, who is called *jik-mongma*, "woman-elephant".

When a man goes to market—an enterprise often involving a journey of several days on foot—it is the *jik-jiti* (a word equivalent to "concubines", but without any derogatory implication) who accompany him to give him physical and moral support. In a way they play the part of mistress rather than wife. The jik-mongma has a standing which gives her a certain authority over her young companions. When a man marries his uncle's widow after previously marrying his daughter, the former automatically becomes jik-mongma, the privilege of age and a fair exchange for the valuable concession she has made to her nephew's clan.

It will be seen that polygamy exists on a large scale, though the man must be authorized to take other wives by the first wife or his mahari. There are only two cases in which taking another wife is a duty. On the death of his father-in-law the nokrom is obliged to marry the widow, who thereby becomes the jik-mongma, principal wife, his previous legal wife taking second place though she may have been married to him for years.

The second case is that of the noknara, who is an adopted nokna supplied by the wife's mahari on the terms that she also shall be a jik-jiti and enjoy a real nokna's rights of inheritance. This procedure eliminates the nokrom, whose place is taken by the adoptive father.

In these two cases the woman is a genuine wife, even though she is called a jik-jiti, whereas in all other cases she is purely and simply a concubine and has no rights of property or inheritance.

On the death of their husbands these true concubines have the choice of marrying the nokrom (if he is agreeable) or leaving the house and going off to marry elsewhere. But another husband will not be found for them.

After a long day's hunting Naz and Marak, accompanied by the "Piper", have brought in a tiger, a splendid animal measuring eight feet four inches.

"Three tigers came out of the jungle, one after the other," Naz told me. "I fired, but so many tigers all at once caused such a panic among our elephants that I had to stop. The tigers disappeared, and it was only after a two hours' chase that we caught up with this animal, the mother. It was a long and exhausting chase, as this tigress proved very wily, never facing our guns and time and again slipping between the legs of the elephants. She did not live to see the glow of sunset, poor beast! Though she had been wounded by my first shot, she put up a fight until B.B.'s shot stretched her dead, putting an end to her fearful roaring and the instinctive will to live and recover her cubs."

While I was running a hand over the splendid creature Dikkija tapped me on the shoulder.

"I'll give you the shoulder-blades. They're lucky, a charm against all evil spirits or diseases. You needn't feel sorry for her; she was a man-eater."

Of course I knew that, but could not help admiring her all the same.

I know that some very odd tiger stories are in circulation among the Garos. There is an old superstition that some men have the power to change themselves into tigers, so everything concerned with this superb creature is more or less taboo. Tiger worship is universal throughout Assam. Among the Garos there are two kinds of tiger-men, the *matchamarus* and the *matchadus*. Both are evil spirits, but there is a difference, as the former are demons while the latter are human beings who can assume either human or tiger shape.

I was told several stories about these tiger-men. Here is one in its original version.

"Once upon a time there were some matchadus who were in the habit of visiting villages as men by day and tigers by night. Every time they came a cow or goat disappeared. One day these matchadus assembled near a village and decided to carry

off some peasants. They proceeded to seize and devour some and acquired a liking for human flesh.

"Hearing about this, a villager named Abet summoned all his strength and swore he would catch the matchadus and cast a spell on them.

"He gathered some sweet-smelling bananas and went to market. Everybody came to see what Abet had to sell and he said to them: 'Would you like some fruit to eat?'

"There were some matchadus in human form among the villagers and they asked: 'Does your fruit grow on a tree?' Abet replied: 'The trees on which this fruit grows are very big and tall.'

"Then he distributed the bananas he had brought and everyone feasted on them, including the matchadus, who asked him: 'Have you any more?' Abet answered: 'If you like them, why don't you all come to my country? You have only to hold out your hands while I shake them down.'

"When he got back to his village Abet sawed three-quarters through a great *simul*[1] which was fifteen cubits in circumference. It took him seven days and on the eighth he sent for the matchadus: 'Come and get your fruit!' They all came and held out their hands below the tree. Then Abet shook the capoc and down it came, crushing all the matchadus beneath.

"So there are no matchadus left in this corner of the hills. But you will still find them elsewhere!"

The Garo chronicles are full of stories about matchadus. In most of them the humans are quite content to mystify the beasts, but in tales of man-eaters the animal is killed and there must be a major sacrifice—at least an ox and two jars of spirit—for the soul of the man who may be inside the tiger.

In the afternoon we stopped work to find out what two furious Garos were quarrelling about.

The subject of the dispute was the tigress. An ancient belief was involved. The villagers object to anyone "reporting" an animal. They think that the spirit of the dead tiger will return to seek revenge unless its skin is removed and exposed for seven moons on the platform of a house.

The man who had reported the man-eater had come to claim the skin and received no satisfaction.

"This fellow has a right to it," Marak explained, "and the nokma will give it to him when the animal is cut up, but he had no business to come to the village. He might bring bad luck. He

[1] *Bombax malabaricum*, capoc tree.

must wait seven moons, and that's why the other man won't let him pass."

What a subject for study these fascinating Garos are! B.B. Marak also tells me that when a man has been killed by a tiger he can never leave it but remains to warn it of all the dangers in its path. It is then impossible to kill it.

"But you've killed this one all right!"

Our good Marak, the most civilized of all my Garos, pondered deeply for a moment and then gravely replied:

"This tigress had killed many men, so it had *several* spirits sitting on its head, and as men are always quarrelling and never agree about anything it couldn't decide what to do today."

There are certain taboos relating to anyone killed by a tiger. If his body is found it must not be brought back into the village. Not only are the usual burial rites refused but everything habitually used, clothes, cooking utensils, sword and spear, must be burned with the body on the spot where it was found. It is taboo to use them after such a death. His whole family to some extent becomes the victim of the dead man's spirit. If anyone is ill, it is because the remains of the poor fellow are wandering around the house and trying to establish contact with his relations.

I visited a woman from a neighbouring village who was suffering from bronchial pneumonia. The sorcerer was plying his trade. Standing in the doorway, speaking in jerks and stressing every word, he offered up prayers to the genii that the spirits of the men eaten by the tigress would be appeased and depart.[1]

All Garos know how to cope with any and every situation, but when I asked them why, they inevitably answer "*Uija!*" (I don't know) or "*Marang!*" which is much more serious because it means "taboo".

Some of these marangs which are generously endowed with secret or sinister powers affect a whole village while others, much more numerous, apply to individuals only. To this day I have only discovered one marang for the whole community; it is the absolute prohibition of any work in the fields on the day a child is born. It is to be assumed that whatever the condition or the stage of the harvests they will be under some malevolent spell.

The marangs for individuals are many. It is marang to kill an elephant. Yet elephant hunting is so profitable that this taboo is generally defied, except in our part of the country. For six or seven years the lone elephant of which we have heard so much has been wandering about in the forest, though it could have been shot or trapped long ago and the government has

[1] In the case of men killed by any other animal there is no taboo.

offered a substantial reward. But taboo! No one will "report" the elephant. It is marang for a man to wear the clothes of his sister's husband and for a woman to touch the clothes of a male relation such as a brother, husband or uncle. In this world of disembodied spirits whose anger must not be provoked there are strange, uncontrollable powers which will punish the slightest infringement with all sorts of calamities.

Keep an eye on the cock crowing on the roof at nightfall! It is a bad augury! Beware of the hen which tries to crow like a cock and, above all, never let a pig enter your house! It is also marang to refuse any food you are offered.

"Why all these prohibitions, B.B.?" I asked my interpreter one day.

Had he had enough of my questions? He showed me the whites of his eyes, hesitated for a moment and then, pointing in the direction of the jungle-covered mountains beyond the village, replied:

"Why must we watch over the harvest day and night? Why do we go to so much trouble to get food for ourselves and those who are dear to us? Why so much effort to keep sickness away and cure those who are struck down by fevers? Can you say?"

"Tell me," I replied, moved by his gentle and persuasive voice.

"Why do we show so much reverence towards the souls of the dead and animals which have been killed? It is because it is only fitting. All our customs, beliefs, taboos and inhibitions are rooted in the distant past, the background of our whole existence. Such things cannot be explained. They are a great organic force, as mysterious as they are sacred. But in what I am going to tell you you will find all the answers. *We are afraid!* We fear the forces of nature, which we must propitiate if the seed is to germinate and our poor harvests are to ripen.

"We fear the diseases and sufferings we see all round us. We fear the spirits which are responsible for the motions of the stars, for wind, rain, disease and death. That is why our ancestors armed us with all these rules of life which so astonish you; they are the fruits of their knowledge and experience.

"We obey them because we thereby acquire the right to live our lives without worries and with the minimum of trouble with the powers which are beyond our ken and are both things and beings, living and dead. . . . That is why we respect taboos.

"In days long ago, too far away to remember, there were no religious or social prohibitions. There were no disasters and no taboos. One day a woman conceived a child, and that child was marang. During conception its body seemed to be of solid gold

and it had red eyebrows. The future mother addressed the sun: 'What am I conceiving? Is it a golden being with pink eyebrows?'

"The sun replied: 'You are conceiving a rainbow and a striped jungle spider in one person. When you feel the first pangs of delivery you must empty your belly and keep your legs wide apart above the chasms of the earth.'

"Thus she gave birth to him who was named Marang-Starang incarnated as seven different persons and revealed him-When he grew up he climbed to the top of a capoc tree which reached to the sky and disappeared. Later on, Marang-Starang incarnated seven different persons and revealed himself to the dwellers on earth on seven occasions.

"A rich patriarch of the underworld said to his subjects:

"'I am leaving for the upper regions. Prepare my way.' He appointed a day for his departure, but then changed his mind and, without letting anyone know, left by himself before the appointed day came round.

"His subjects, who had scattered to clear a path through the jungle, did not notice him passing and inadvertently inflicted innumerable wounds on him with their knives. Much blood flowed. At that moment Marang-Starang appeared in the form of amazing streams of blood.

"Then there was a great war. In the midst of the bloody fray Marang-Starang appeared in the form of gaping wounds and his crimson blood flowed in streams as warriors charged, uttering screams of victory.

"One day Marak Gahora set off to market, armed with his bow and arrows. On the way he met Jane Nitepa who said to him: 'Your bow looks like an animal's curving back and your arrows a palm tree. You are wearing your mother-in-law's clothes!'

"Marak Gahora replied: 'The bow is mine, the clothes are mine. Why do you insult me thus? You shall pay for it!'

"And he went on his way, nursing his grievance. The allusion to his mother-in-law was an insult and he decided to attack the man. So they fought. Both were wounded and their blood flowed like water. At that moment Marang-Starang appeared in the form of fire and lightning.

"One day Gandopang fought with Matbylrang, the patriarch of the bears. Matbylrang had been warned to keep his niece Balmatchi at a distance during the fight. Having moved round in the course of their furious struggle, they thrust their spears into the belly of Balmatchi who fell dead on the spot in a pool of blood. Then Marang-Starang appeared.

"Marak Botirak usually carried a poisoned needle on him. One day he hid himself in Kondambne's refuse bin, pricked him and ran away. Maddened with pain, Kondambne set out in pursuit, caught up with him and cut him in pieces. Marang-Starang appeared again.

"One of the sons of Mande and a son of Mehgam were great friends. One day this son of Mande was eating with his children. They were chewing wild plaintain and sugar cane when the son of Mehgam arrived. The latter was looking for his castrated pig which he had lost a few days previously. He took the wild plantain and the sugar cane for his pig and accused the son of Mande of having stolen it. They had a fight. Both were grievously wounded and their blood flowed like rivers in the spring. From their terrible wounds rose Marang-Starang.

"Since then Marang-Starang has always appeared among men in the form of streams of blood, ruthless vengeance or horrible diseases.

"So now you know why we take care not to provoke his appearance, and why so many things are taboo in our villages," B.B. Marak concluded.

What was friend Marak singing this evening? The wind was rising in a blood-red sky and I could not get the Marang-Starang legend out of my mind. The horizon and the gaunt line of the distant mountains seemed an abrupt barrier to the fantastic, other-earthly conflagration.

A'gitakramchi, chikaré am chi' re' ang, re' ang: which means: "Go away, O wind; go away; sweep over the mountains and the dark chasm, but do not touch the flames."

I sent for Marak and asked him to tell me some more stories, stories about lightning and thunder—any I had not heard before.

"You have heard of Goéra, the god of strength, and all the forces of nature. Well, it is the clashing of his sword which makes those flashes in the sky. Once upon a time he lived on earth and had a marvellous sword with which he slew a monster which had the form of a pig and was as big as a mountain. Now Goéra has ascended to the skies. From time to time he gets bored and then he plays at war with the other gods. Lightning is the result of these celestial contests. . . ."[1]

As our supper was not nearly ready, B.B. went on to tell me something really sensational.

"Do you know that we think of the earth as a big square tray

[1] In Garo language *goéra goa* = "struck by Goa", which means struck by lightning.

hanging from the sky by four cords? Each of these cords is the home of a squirrel intent on gnawing it through. Four blind men are standing by to keep an eye on them. It sometimes happens that one of these blind men gets tired and careless and neglects his job. Then the squirrel begins to gnaw the cord, and this causes the earthquakes which bring our hills rumbling down.

"Another thing you must learn is to be wary of Nawang, an evil spirit which lives permanently among us. You will have heard of him. Nawang is the spirit of the eclipses. It is supposed that from time to time he tries to swallow the sun and the moon. As soon as his shadow crosses either, the tam-tams resound in every village, and the ox-horns are blown to frighten him away."

Down in the village street a man was swinging a chopper and humming B.B.'s refrain *A' gitakramchi, chikaré am chi' re' ang, re' ang!* . . .

"He wants to drive off the wind which is always trying to blow away our roofs on winter nights," Marak explained.

Quite early in the night—it may have been midnight, or perhaps one o'clock—we were sleeping soundly at the back of the house when we were suddenly roused by a terrific din. I was up in a flash and immediately overcome by a feeling of fear. I sensed that something unpleasant was certainly coming. There was no Garo in the house, not even Marak! Mukherjee was saying something in Bengali to Haricharan who was wailing and tugging at his blanket while Peter was answering a shout from Naz, who was up already. My imagination raced away: our lives here had been too uneventful and now the long-awaited adventure was at hand—an attack by wild elephants or a hostile tribe!

I followed Naz, who seemed worried. In the little moonlit clearing in front of the house a crowd of yelling villagers were milling round jars of liquor which they had dragged out to the accompaniment of a shattering din from gongs and tam-tams. This unusual gathering at dead of night was decidedly alarming. It was contrary to all the rules of Garo etiquette, though our knowledge is admittedly limited. On the atela a compact group was surrounded by Garos emitting a strident whistle which was echoed from the nearby hills and bush.

"Bless my soul, they're going to start cutting off heads!" said Naz in his most roguish tone.

"Hush!" muttered Mukherjee, his teeth chattering. "Don't get excited! Are we all here?"

From one of the houses came loud cries in reply to shouts

from the river bank. The rhythm of the gongs became faster.

B.B. Marak must have seen us. I must confess I was relieved to see him coming. He looked his usual good-natured self, but with the suspicion of a grin.

"Come and see! Come and see!" he shouted.

"What on earth's happening?" we all cried out at once.

Marak put his finger to his lips and laughed. Plucking up courage, we stepped forward and saw a young, good-looking Garo lying on the ground with his hands tied behind his back and his feet bound.

"It's just what I told you," Jean whispered in the ear of Mukherjee who, pale with excitement, whispered:

"You don't think they'd dare?"

"It looks very like it," replied Naz, going up to the nokma.

"I'll try and find out."

I admit I was very worried, but B.B.'s mocking smile restored my courage and roused my curiosity.

"What has he been doing?" I asked with a pitying look. "Has he stolen something?"

He burst out laughing.

"Not at all! His only fault is that a girl you know—Nanjak,[1] Mam'ria's cousin—is too fond of him."

"You mean to say he's seduced her? Are they going to cut off his head for *that*?"

This time my words were greeted with shouts of laughter.

"What on earth are you thinking of?"

"Why?"

I still failed to grasp what was happening and Mukherjee was no better off.

Jean Naz came back beaming all over.

"How bogus these 'head-hunters' are!"

It made me furious to see them standing there laughing their heads off:

"Out with it!"

My friends led me away from the noisy crowd and let me into the secret.

The young man lying bound on the ground was Nanjak's choice! There is a very odd custom among the Abengs. Everyone knows that the woman proposes, but not that the proposal is accompanied by certain rites. We were privileged to witness them this evening. When the lady decides to make her choice known she summons her brothers and maternal cousins and uncles and invokes their aid, not to find or notify the lucky man, but to capture him.

[1] Nanjak = young shoots; from *nanga*, to grow, and *jak*, leaves.

When he has been kidnapped—usually in blissful ignorance of the fact that he has taken the maiden's fancy—he is unceremoniously carried off to her house, bound hand and foot. The kidnapping takes place at night and the man is seized in his nokpanthé or while guarding the crops. When the ravishers return to the girl's village, their shouts show that they have the captive with them. All the villagers turn out to jeer at his plight. Then the ceremonies begin in the "men's house". They last for several weeks, as the man is not forced to marry the girl, either at once or at all. The usual procedure is for him to run away three times, hiding in the forest or taking refuge in some distant village. An expedition is sent out to bring him back. When he is caught he is soundly beaten and lodged in the nokpanthé of the girl's village.

If he runs away for the fourth time it means that he rejects the proposal. Otherwise the marriage is arranged at once. The fiancé stays in the village of his future wife and the latter goes off to live with her future in-laws for a month or two. Both make themselves useful and get to know their new relations, thus discharging all existing obligations.

We were all invited to drink in Nanjak's house, which was so crowded that I could hardly distinguish the copper-coloured guests squatting round the jars. I knew Nanjak, a pretty young girl, who greeted me with an intelligent gaze and a resounding welcome:

"Let us thank our guests for coming!" Behind her, in the warm shadow of the house, her smiling family were seated on the ground. I was profoundly impressed by the obvious deference to the jik-mongma, the old woman next to me, and I could sense that she was the real ruler over everyone and everything, though she and her husband spoke in the kindliest tones when they talked together or issued their commands.

A young woman not far away was giving her baby *chucha*, the Garo way of feeding very young children. The mother chews their food, spits it out, rolls it into little balls and then carefully puts them in the infant's mouth. Subtle primitive intuition! A baby's saliva lacks ptyaline, the fermenting agent which promotes digestion of the starch in rice.

B.B. Marak told me that the young man had just been caught after escaping for the third time. It was not yet known whether he would accept the girl. A new act in *l'Ecole des maris* which Molière did not foresee! And all this was taking place in an atmosphere of the utmost seriousness. Though the man and the girl were playing a game there was a tense look in Nanjak's dark eyes which showed that love was present too. I can well

understand it. Cheng[1] is one of the handsomest Garo boys I have seen in these hills.

Outside, the men were roystering round the nokpanthé and the fête livened up still further, to the accompaniment of a pungent smell from roasting meat. Great hunks of dried beef were being cooked. The wild oxen from which it came were slaughtered more than six months ago, since when the strips of meat have been smoked in the sun and wind in anticipation of some such occasion as this.

A little later we learned that there was to be no fourth flight as Cheng was willing to marry Nanjak.

The girl's relations and friends chanted the nuptial hymn, which is more or less the same among all the tribes—a recital of the charms and virtues of the man and the girl. Pure spirit was thrown on the fire and the god Saljong, the sun, guardian spirit of all fertility and the origin of all life on earth, and fire, symbol of family life, were duly invoked. It is a high degree of perception which makes the Garo associate the fire lit for the new couple with the infinite warmth of human love.

At dawn the kamal arrived, accompanied by Cheng, slightly tipsy but quite dignified. The sorcerer held his mylam in one hand and two fowls in the other. He chanted some sort of litany in the presence of the contracting parties and then cut the birds' throats and dropped them on the ground. They lay twitching for a few seconds and then stiffened in death. Their respective positions determine whether the marriage is to be happy or otherwise. If the beaks are turned towards each other, the auguries are favourable; if away from each other disaster is prognosticated. There was a tense moment while the poor birds were expiring and nothing could be heard except wings flapping against the floor. Then the kamal gave a signal and the tam-tams resumed, but notably faster, and were followed by the gongs, their wild music announcing that the auguries were favourable. I held my breath with excitement. The ceremony ended with the kamal praying to Tatara-Rabuga, the creator of the world, and invoking the clans' ancestors and all the beneficent spirits.

Beloved captive! How the Garo girl's dreams come true when the man of her choice accepts her bold proposal! But the affair continues to be governed by strict regulations, crystallized in immemorial rites. I thought I detected a note of disappointment in a charming poem I caught one of my pretty friends

[1] *Cheng* = bitter, a common Garo name.

singing to herself one evening in the porch of her house. It suggested a gentler form of love:

When my betrothed returns
We shall marry,
But if he does not return,
I shall have no one to mount guard in the borang
And the wild elephants will destroy my crops.
My heart will be sadder than my ravaged fields,
Sadder than my house where no wild dove coos,
Sadder than a rainy day when night never comes,
Sadder than the nokpanthé when the men are off to the chase.
I will go into the forest and seek my betrothed,
I will proffer him sweet potatoes and blooms from the taa.

B.B. Marak, sitting close by me, chin in hand and elbows on knees, sipped his shubitshi and told me some more stories which can hardly fail to interest western readers.

"Among the Machi tribe there is another custom which they call *shadila*. A girl who is thinking of proposing cooks a plate of highly seasoned rice, and gets her sister or some other relation to take it to the man of her choice in the nokpanthé. She herself is careful to keep out of sight, hiding among the piles on which the house is built. If the man declines the offering she must beat a very quick retreat to avoid embarrassment in public. If he refuses the food it means that he does not want the girl, but if he eats it all is well. She emerges from the hiding-place, clambers into the nokpanthé and shares the dish with him.

"Sometimes she has another chance even if she has met with a refusal. She can creep into the 'men's house'—or wherever she thinks he may be found—and lie down at his side."

"What happens then?"

"It's very simple. If he still remains indifferent to her charms he must immediately leave the village for a time, as he has insulted her."

But the code of honour is very strict on one point: there must be no indecencies. If the man violates that tradition he is severely punished by the whole clan. He might even find himself permanently deprived of his membership.

There is a very different tradition amongst the Atongs living on the banks of the river Someswari, in the south of the country. During the main festivals the young men and girls have the right to sleep together, but the man must be chosen according to the rules of the game, i.e. the Garo exogamy laws. Is he not considered as the girl's life companion? The young people are not required to marry at once if they do not want to. But if the

girl becomes pregnant, her one-night lover is bound to go and live with her, and in practice will be her husband.

Jean Naz, stretched out on the soft bamboo mat, is lost in reverie. His face glows in the light of the fire. Perhaps he is calculating his chances? Nanjak's sisters have lovely smiles....

I wonder what my technique would be. . . .

The days slip by and leave us little leisure. The evenings seem longer. As soon as the sky turns red the men cease work and gaze at the horizon where great shadows pile up. The vivid cloud formations which draw all eyes are called "the evening hills". "When the sun dies and darkness spreads, sorrow creeps into our hearts. . . ." The women squat in silence in the shadow of the house. The little girls come out, carrying babies, and the tall young men slink off to the "men's house", tired out, especially when there is no prospect of a spree or a night's hunting. This is the hour in which we find ourselves at a loss for something to do and reduced to idling at the smoky fires, which at any rate keep the intolerable mosquitoes away.

Yet if this period is the dullest of the explorer's day, it may well bring him some of his most remarkable experiences. I have been going through my notes and am only just realizing what the close contacts of these evenings have meant to me. I feel very much nearer to the natives and have almost become one of them.

The great attraction to me is that among the Garos I always feel in the presence of a survival of their earliest civilization. But I shall never achieve what I really came for until I get into their minds, obtain their co-operation, win their confidence and help them to show that I have done so.

The task is far from easy. Establishing personal relations calls for tact, psychic powers of adaptation, a great deal of patience and perseverance and, last but not least, real affection.

It is usually at night that I seem nearest to victory, for then we are sitting round with the Garos and I cautiously venture to put tricky questions about the origin of their race, or the gods and the rites. Dikkija often says to me: "How can you hope to get to know men of the forest like us?"; accompanying his remark with a sly smile. Yet I know that it is the nature of any primitive people to have their own idea of the world—and a very clear idea. The day will come when Dikkija or someone else will tell me all about it of their own accord. I can wait.

All these things are very hard to understand for a European who comes to a Garo village for the first time and tries to live

its life. Few people are so traditionalist and genuinely pious, their religious beliefs and daily habits being intimately associated. In few tribes can one find so elaborate a social structure or so harmonious a metaphysical system. Here, every action, whether concerned with worship of the gods or mundane domestic gesture, is performed with that same nonchalant ease which neither lacks grace nor a certain element of grandeur. How often have I had occasion to admire the priest preparing the day's ritual without assuming the affected air adopted in our places of worship! The children go on playing round him, the sound of singing comes from the nokpanthé and the men carry on with their snoring or chatter while he is officiating, sometimes pausing to look round him before resuming his litany at the point where he stopped.

The religion of the Garos is essentially animist. In common with all who dwell in her capricious heart, they adore the forces of nature. It is a religion inspired by fear, the fear instinctively felt by a man living among surroundings he knows he can never master. I defy anyone who has lived for long in the forest to deny that he has experienced that feeling which defies exorcism by strength of mind or even the revolver in one's belt. Thus the Garos worship the wind, thunder, the sun, the moon, the rain, lightning—which to them are manifestations of spirits dwelling in the sky.

Among primitive peoples, customs, habits, social organization, the very elements of existence, are functions of belief in their gods. As a result of having spent a long time among them, I can say that, despite all our philosophic and religious systems, I do not believe that we can give them anything better. We have too many doubts in our own minds. . . .

III

A FEW days ago B.B. Marak was talking about a leper who knows all about the spiritual life of the tribe. He lives in the Rangira hills many miles from here.

For several days Naz and I have been discussing the possibility of paying him a visit with Mukherjee, but the latter's replies are always evasive.

The idea does not recommend itself at all to our colleague; the trip would involve several halts and take more than a week.

"Mukherjee, we're breaking camp tomorrow morning," I announced one evening.

He was startled. "Really? But it's not in Dr. Guha's itinerary."

"Perhaps not, but it's in mine. Of course you need not come with us."

He frowned and a hard look came into his eyes.

"So you want to leave me here alone?"

"No, but I shall take only an interpreter and two porters with me. We shall be away for three weeks at least and you'll be left in peace to get on with your work."

"You've no business to be going. The valley has a bad reputation. Round here it's called the 'accursed valley', the valley where you get lost. . . ."

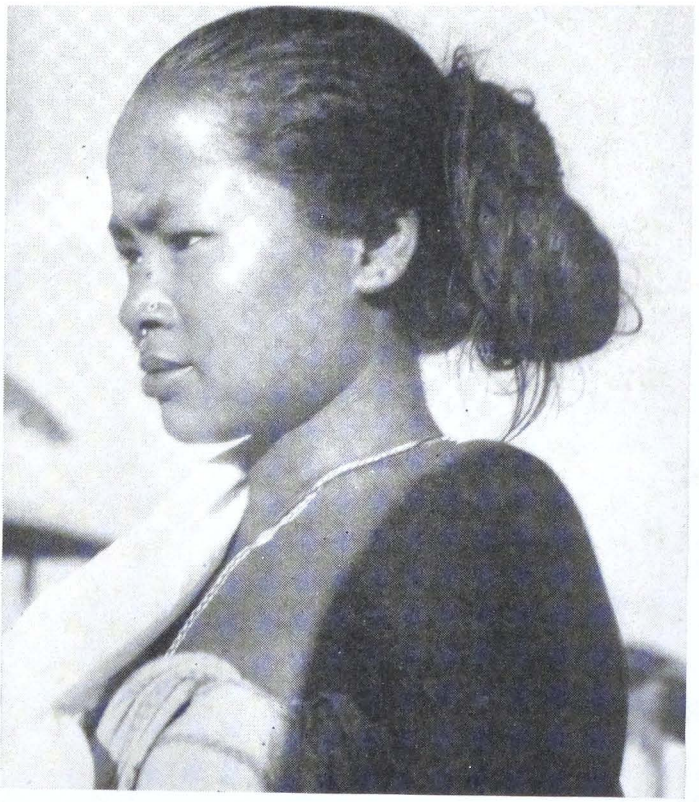
Mukherjee is patently afraid of this little-known region. He must have been told the legend about the spirit of Rangira, the hideous male-plus-female monster which tucks up its legs and haunts muddy marshes. It has long arms, hanging down to the ground, and uses them to seize and strangle human beings attracted by its baleful arts. Even those who merely catch a glimpse of it do not escape unscathed. If they are lucky enough to get back at all, they will never be themselves again but only miserable, degraded shadows.

What an astonishing description of the fevers haunting the enchanted valleys of the central mountain chain! I have set down this legend, born of the primitive imagination of our friends, word for word, but it makes me smile to think that it only acquired its essentially superstitious flavour because it was channelled through the mind of our highly civilized Bengali! I expected to see him smiling and shrugging his shoulders, as I was. Not at all. I have often noticed this age-old resurgence of a primitive terror which is always lurking in the background with my Indian friends.

Our last evenings at the Allagiri Camp were rich in revelation. The villagers came round to take part in the discussions and listen to Dikkija's stories. He is past-master in the art, and the words of his rich language fall from his lips in a smooth and limpid stream while the Garo gods possess his mind and endow him with a sort of eloquence.

"I have little knowledge of my own," he said, "but I've often been up country to buy cotton or examine new plantations and I have learned much from what I have seen with my own eyes or through the eyes of others. With my ears I have heard men talking; I listened to everything they said and that is why I have no reason to boast of this knowledge which is not my own. I have dreamed a great deal as well; those who can dream hear and see many things."

A Garo drummer



(*Left*) A Boro woman

(*Below*) A Garo woman preparing a meal

All the same I suspect that there is something of the sorcerer in Dikkija. His eyes, calm and deep-set, sparkle in the light of a fire. When he talks he sometimes half closes them, as if he wants to conceal the fire within, and then he opens them again and looks round at us. I am certain that this practice is not a trick. Its effect on us is a sort of spell, a slow process which we make no effort to frustrate.

"Before beginning with the history of the world, you must know all the gods and the various names under which they are worshipped. The use of these names is governed by circumstances and that is why our villages need one or more kamals who know all this by heart.

"Not only are there great numbers of gods but their names are exceptionally long. In most cases they are double, and the names of their supposed ancestors to the third generation are frequently added.

"Tatara Rabuga is the universal creator. He appointed two inferior spirits, his servants Nostu Napantu and Machi, to make the world.

"All the sacrifices offered to Tatara Rabuga cost a great deal, and food and drink for two days must be given to everyone present.

"Before consuming the first fruits of the season, whether maize, millet, rice, melon or breadfruit, a small portion must be offered to Chorabondé, a kindly spirit who is guardian of the harvest. In return for this sign of respect Chorabondé tells his worshippers all that is happening on and beneath the earth. Saljong, the god of fertility who is represented by the sun, is the most beloved of the gods because he makes all things to ripen. Without his blessing, the paddy barns stay empty and man cannot live. Have you heard of the greatest celebration of the year, the fête of the Wangala, when the gongs are hung up for several weeks? It is in his honour. When you come back from 'the leper's mountain' we shall celebrate the Wangala and you will drink the mild spirit brewed from new rice. When you hear Salgira or Salgra mentioned in our hills it is Saljong who is referred to, and you can sacrifice a chicken to him without any specific reason. Saljong is always needed!"

I entirely agree with him, and when I return to the winter mists of our rainy Europe I will gladly sacrifice a fowl to induce him to shine in the sky.

"Goéra is the god of strength. He it is who releases the thunder and lightning. He is a monstrous giant whose head you can never see because it is always hidden in the clouds which everywhere accompany him. After a long illness you offer sacrifices to

him to recover your health. A black pig,[1] chicken or duck is sacrificed at the foot of a tree. And do not forget that if you find a tree which has been struck by lightning you must sacrifice to him lest any evil befall you and your village.

"Kalkamé is Goéra's son. He is the spirit who holds men's lives in his hands. It is he who gives warning of all dangers, the dangers of the forest, the rivers and the sky. Before you leave I will take you to the *asong*, the sacrificial stones placed at the entrance to the village which you have often passed without noticing. He is the god honoured in the ceremony of the Asongtata, one of our most important festivals."

Friend Dikkija lowered his eyes, probably to avoid seeing our blushes, such was our humiliation! I had known of the Asongtata festival among the Garos since my first reading of James George Frazer;[2] it is the story of the scapegoat on which man piles all the evils of the year past and which gives warning of the troubles ahead in the next twelve months.

"Give me your attention. I have more to say," continued Dikkija. "After Kalkamé comes Susimé, who distributes wealth; a strange goddess with powers of both good and evil. She can strike men with blindness and also cure them of that infirmity, make them lame and also take away their lameness. Susimé appears to us in the form of the moon. The moon, the only spirit in feminine form, is the most feared of all because, though she gives man what he needs, and more than he needs, she also takes it away when she is angry. The taboos relating to her are very strict. You must wait until the morning dew is dried on the leaves before you work in the fields; dew is the tears shed by the goddess for the lost love of her brother, the sun. In days of old, brothers and sisters had incestuous relations, which pollute the blood. To put an end to the practice, the god of creation punished the eldest brother and sister and sent them into the sky where they became the sun and moon and were condemned to keep apart for ever. When one appears, the other must flee away. Susimé sometimes cheats by lingering on after the sun has appeared; you can then see her hiding behind a mountain and covering her face with a thick veil.

"Her sacred birds are pigeons and doves, which we never eat, and wild ducks which roost in the moon every night.

"So you see that no one has ever known how these things began. They are what they were in the days long ago when our

[1] In all these rites the colour of the animal is an essential part of the charm. Everything black will darken the sky with clouds and so Goéra will come.

[2] *The Golden Bough.*

people first began to remember. But every child in its cradle knows that our gods were once men who were hurled into space.

"In course of time evil deeds and violated taboos have peopled the universe with spirits more or less well disposed. Nawang, the 'lord of the road of the souls', is an evil spirit who tries to devour souls when they are making their way to purgatory after death. Nor does he fear to attack the living when they can be found on some remote forest trail and have forgotten to bring their iron sword[1] with them. You can meet him in human form. It is Nawang who is the cause of stomach troubles, vomiting and diarrhoea; he is always threatening your life."

"That is the essence of what you need to know about the gods and I will now tell you how the world came to be. The world is large and has room for all the living, and even for the dead when they are no longer visible to us.

"In the beginning, what is now the world was a vast plain covered with water. There was no light and everything was dark. Tatara Rabuga decided to make the world and he sent his servant, Nostu-Nopantu, in the form of a woman, to carry out his intentions. There was absolutely no room for the latter anywhere so he was very glad to hear a spider offer him a place on his web. All the building material Tatara Rabuga had given him was a handful of sand, which was quite inadequate as the grains would not stick together. So Nostu-Nopantu sent a big crab to the bottom of the water to find a little clay; but the water was too deep and the crab had to come back empty-handed. Then Nostu sent a little crab, Shipong-Nokma, but it got frightened and turned back half way. Finally Nostu picked on Shishing-Barshing, the water beetle, and sent him where the big crab and the little crab had failed. He came back with a lump of clay and Nostu-Nopantu was able to fashion the earth.

"The world made in this way was called Mané-Pilté and the great rocks were Dinjar. But the surface remained muddy and no one could walk on it without getting dirty. So Nostu-Nopantu asked Tatara Rabuga to help and the latter sent him the sun. The wind came to the rescue and they were both ordered to dry the earth.

"Then Tatara gave the earth[2] a *riking* and a *pagri*[3] made of clouds. He also presented her with a marvellous head of hair in the form of *prap*[4] and *blong*,[5] *sawé* and *rejok*[6] and made her a bed of *ampang*, the straw grass which we use for our roofs.

[1] The mylam.
[2] Considered female.
[3] Female garments.
[4] *Ficus rumphi.*
[5] Bamboos.
[6] A sort of sugar cane.

"Thus the world was born in days long ago, days of which we know nothing now. The animals came first because it was easier that way. Tatara created the screaming monkey first, its duty being to scream loudly to prevent Mané from going to sleep and forgetting her function to reproduce. Then he created the other monkeys, the frog and many fishes.

"There was a vast amount of water under the earth but none on the surface, so the creator then had the idea of making rain, Noréchiré-Kimbokré, and he married it to the favourite daughter of Goéra, thunder, which always precedes rain and announces its coming.

"But men, at any rate men looking like us, had not yet been created. Tatara summoned all the auxiliary and inferior spirits and announced his intention of placing us on the surface of the earth. He sent Susimé to choose a land, which was named Amitong-Asiljong, to the east of the mountains, and the first man and woman were Sani and Muni, whose children were the ancestors of the Atchik race.

"The first inhabitants of the earth had no rice to eat. When they were hungry they had to dig in the ground and live on roots and the wild fruits of the forest. The first two men who thought of cultivating the land cleared the forest in the way we do and Tatara Rabuga, to whom they offered wild gourds, made rice grow. Since then everything good comes to us from the land.

"And that is not all. When Tatara sent Nostu-Nopantu to make the earth he sent Brara and his wife Dogni to make the stars. Though under orders to waste no time Brara was lazy and instead of getting along with his work flirted with his wife's servant. The wife found out and decided to punish him. She collected all the germs of the skin diseases she knew and put them in a pot which the two lovers were to take with them on a clandestine journey in the sky.

"No sooner had they begun to drink than they were covered with spots and sores, which made them very miserable. They returned to Dogni who knew the remedy for their afflictions. Brara thus realized that she knew. He confessed and repented, promising never to be tempted again. The two lovers were forgiven and cured.

"Brara then made the stars.

"The stars *in toto* are called Noringro-Nogingo. We recognize fourteen constellations to which we have given names. We need them for certain of our funeral ceremonies which date back to the burial of the moon's mother. As we ourselves will be when we die, the mother of Susimé was burnt when she died and

each of the stars played its part at her funeral just as they do in ours today. There was Mangripe[1] representing the hariot bearing the corpse to the pyre, Mirontek, the basket of rice for the mourners, Walsaldo,[2] the star which lights the fire, Doe-Sadil,[3] the sacrificial cock which conducts the deceased to his last resting-place in the best burial-ground, and Chapohoré and Nonjé,[4] the two sisters who arrived for the funeral in most beautiful clothes. They were so lovely that Susimé immediately ordered them to ascend to the sky and stay there for ever in all their beauty. . . .

"Mengoripé is the family cat who never leaves his mistress and Wakripe[5] the pig which was served up to the dead woman to feed her on her way to the next world. Manganchi[6] represents the four posts between which the wood for the cremation is stacked. The brightest of them represents the post to which a buffalo was tied before sacrifice. This buffalo has left his tracks in the sky; you can still see them; they are the Matma Jakol.[7]

"Do you know the story? A buffalo was brought along for the funeral ceremony. It was so terrified by the noise of the hunting-horns and the beating of the drums that the kamal motioned to the musicians to stop. But the latter did not understand and continued with all their might so that the animal tugged at its rope and broke it and galloped off into the sky. That band across the firmament which you see so well at night is the silver dust it kicked up behind it, Pringpang[8] the morning star, warns the cock of the near approach of day so that he can crow in its honour and wake sleeping mankind. Atampang[9] is the evening star; it announces the time to shut up the fowls for the night. There are some stars in the sky which call attention to themselves when you are scanning the vast vault of the heavens. In days of old these stars were married to humans before they returned to the sky. From time to time they come down again to see if they can recognize those they have never forgotten."

"Is that all?"

"Later on there was war among the gods; but that's another story. . . ."

"Please tell it," said Marak.

"Your eyes are closing with sleep," replied our host, "and I could not trouble your repose with my stories."

[1] Cassiopeia.
[2] Sirius.
[3] The Pleiades.
[4] Castor and Pollux.
[5] Orion's Belt.
[6] Pegasus.
[7] The Milky Way. Literally "buffalo tracks".
[8] Venus.
[9] Venus.

This was an allusion to poor Mukherjee lying fast asleep at my feet. It had been too much for him! From the back of the house came the sound of our servants snoring. Only Marak, Naz and I were left by the fire, which was assiduously stoked by the women. I stretched myself and Marak asked for a drink. At that moment I noticed for the first time that one part of the house was thronged with people. What a surprise it was to see them in the semi-darkness, silent and absorbed, arresting figures in their splendid turbans and winter blankets. As if a wind had suddenly swept over them, they leaned forward and began to chant a poem in the nokma's honour.

O man! Great man of our village
Thy words are like unto the gongs of our ancestors
In whose tracks we dwell.
Thy words are strong as the spirit of the air
And the soil we till . . .
Recall for us the stories of the days gone by,
That we may never forget them.
Nor our children nor our children's children.
Recall, recall for us,
Life is fair in winter,
When the harvest is gathered in.
Life is fair when thou speakest of those
Who dwell "North, East and West of us"! . . .

At that moment the nokma rose and respectfully touched the ceiling of the house.

B.B. explained to me that the villagers were calling for an Atchik legend which is known as the "Chronicle of the Human Race". It is nothing less than the mythical explanation of the distribution of the clans and the fierce rivalry between the Sangmas and the Maraks, the two most important Atchik families.

I wanted to hear it too. The old bard must surely know! We were not asleep and he could go on talking all night as our time here is too short to waste in sleep!

The fires were crackling afresh in the house and the drinks induced a comforting warmth. The shadows were filled with shining faces and sparkling eyes.

Now that the liquor had circulated everyone wanted to sing and the nokma had a drink and hasty smoke in the interval before resuming his long legends. A wild-looking girl, quite charming in her high turban, began to sing the story of the *sammykmal*, the plant with the magical philtres.

She came and sat down beside us before she began in her

fresh, clear voice. All the women present joined in the preliminary incantations:

"Aya . . . Aya!"

"The potion plant grew freely in a very barren corner of the subterranean regions. The inhabitants of those regions never felt the heat of the sun. . . .

"They made love unashamedly. . . .

"They played on their flutes which were made of bamboo dipped in the potion. The sweet sounds of their instruments were such as to fill their hearers with joy.

"Aya . . . Aya . . . Aya . . .!

"Kabu Ranché, Goéra's mother, became a widow. Her cousins were wont to play to her on their ordinary bamboo flutes and each in turn tried to entice the fair Kabu Ranché to let him share her couch.

"But she would have none of their persuasions or their flutes; she did not answer their glances or advances, nor did she listen to the love songs they played for her.

"It was then that Saljong found the potion plant in the subterranean regions and grew it on the surface of the earth.

"One fine day Kabu Ranché's would-be lovers realized that the music of their flutes was of no avail. They found out that Saljong had stolen the potion plant from the depths of the earth and planted it in his garden.

"They went off to find him and persuade him to part with it. Saljong gave it to them. They made a potion from it and when their flutes were dipped in the potion they became magical. Kabu Ranché began to smile at her cousins and even gave them looks of love.

"Young bamboo shoots and the soft horns of a stag were offered to her as a gift. Then she followed them into dark corners and to the sandy banks of rivers to take her fill of their love.

"And thus the Abeng race was born!"

"Aya . . . Aya . . . Aya."

"Thus was our tribe created," said Dikkija, pointedly, turning to me. "Have you understood?"

I had understood all right. The story is not exactly elevating, but how charming!

The "Chronicle of the Human Race" was not begun without certain rites, as the spirit of days gone by is still very much alive in these parts. The best drummer in the village was standing in the middle of the assembly throughout the nokma's long dissertation. His other function was to be solo vocalist.

At the end of each stanza he repeated the concluding words. His melodies were limited to very few notes and yet they never seemed monotonous; the performer's constant changes of tempo provided the element of diversity.

The great roll of drums announcing the beginning of the story woke Mukherjee with a start. He gazed at us with an unforgettable expression of astonishment and curiosity.

"You've no business snoring through a story like this," Naz told him.

Our colleague grunted and rose to his feet, adjusted his tortoise-shell spectacles and then tried to squat closer to us. He seemed only half awake and in a very bad temper. He must have been all at sea, feeling himself a pitiful relic of modernity back among the men of the forest.

The nokma began to speak and the silence in the house became so oppressive that through the thin bamboo walls we could hear the buzz of insects in the bush and night birds brushing the thatch as they flew round, uttering plaintive cries. We felt very close to these Garo men and women who still revere the wisdom of their ancestors.

The nokma went on to tell how in the course of the ages the god Tatara saw men increase and multiply and ordered them to divide their number into families and clans; how Sangmas, Maraks, and Momins provided the most important clans; how the Momin tribe, seized with terror at the sight of a huge eagle, a gigantic tiger, mosquitoes big as cats and frogs larger than men, changed direction and made its home in the northern mountains; how the Sangma and Marak clans braved these terrors and how the Sangmas proved their superiority to the Maraks in many encounters, thanks to the way in which the oracle Tuara taught them to communicate with the elements, the spirits and all living things.

A PRIMITIVE SOCIETY AND ITS LAWS

On the map of the world this little corner of the Garo Hills may well be lost, but what a wealth of virtue and simple faith its primitive society has to offer! In its presence we are brought up sharp, but we have at least one source of comfort, "What has been tried, even in vain, can be tried again. The age of gold which blind superstition had placed behind (or ahead of) us is within us. Human brotherhood begins to mean something when in some insignificant tribe we see our own image and a phenomenon the lessons of which we would do well to learn. We should find them recovering all their ancient novelty.

By what freak of memory was a society which could not write able to transmit to generation after generation a code of honour which makes our cleverest lawyers blush, and an elaborate yet harmonious code of laws regulating daily life almost too well? To those laws Garo society is, and will long remain, fanatically attached. The Garo laws can be classified in three words and those three words are a self-contained code of observances as well as a mirror of Garo mentality. They are *asimalja*, *dakmalja* and *nima*.

None of these words can be defined or translated literally. Asimalja, for instance, represents a moral rather than a legal force, a force which is an inseparable part of Garo history. When someone says "Asimalja!" the word is so potent that a Garo about to commit a crime thinks better of it and anyone who has yielded to temptation is stricken to the heart.

There is a legend about a woman named Asi and her husband Malja. They committed a terrible crime and died a violent death. Asi was killed by a tiger and Malja was caught and devoured by a crocodile. The memory of this couple was transmitted from generation to generation and to it can be traced the established belief that anyone committing the same crime as Malja and Asi will incur the wrath of the gods and die a violent and painful death. Nor is that all. Their bodies cannot be burned in accordance with the Atchik ceremonial designed to help the spirit on its journey to eternal rest. No human law can punish them. It is a matter for Saljong and Susimé alone.

Many sins are asimalja to the Garo mind—anything which disrupts the harmony of law and order and draws down the anger of the gods not only on the sinners but the whole community. One grave transgression is to fail to observe the days of purification or the ceremonies governing the relations between the gods and mankind. On these occasions everyone must cooperate and the negligence of a single individual is enough to frustrate the efforts of a whole village to get rid of some incubus or malevolent spirit. The latter may bide its time but its vengeance will be indiscriminate when it comes!

The worst of all crimes is marriage with someone within the prohibited degrees, i.e. from the same matchong. A man and woman from the same matchong are automatically considered brother and sister.

There are other prohibitions affecting marriage. No man who is not a nokrom can marry his mother-in-law or his wife's elder sister—or the widow of his elder brother. Nor can a widow marry the widower of her elder sister.

Although the Garos do not raise temples to their spirits they

believe that they dwell in close proximity to villages so that they can see and hear everything that is going on. The exact spot is well known and carefully avoided. Anyone who commits the sin of working, felling trees or even cutting grass on that spot must fear the anger of the spirits. There is another village site which is called *kosi*. It is a sort of grove of trees, bamboos and grasses which is reserved for the gods. Except on official ceremonial occasions no one is permitted to cut down anything at all on that spot. The profanation of the *kosi* is considered a very grave crime, even though no spirit dwells there.

Another asimalja is to make any sort of practical use of objects which have been set aside for the nokma on the day of his investiture. These objects have been specially dedicated to a *mite*[1] who will thus be insulted and seek vengeance.

Woe betide him who takes a false oath on the head of his son, for all oaths are sworn in the presence of all the spirits as well as numerous witnesses. Spirits are better judges than men and will have their revenge.

Another sin is to fail to respect the tradition requiring the first-fruits to be offered to the spirit of the harvest, or to partake of them before the spirit has done so.

In all these cases the transgressors are never punished by the community but only by the gods—which does not mean that they are not despised by their friends and relations and everyone who knows what they have done.

Dakmalja is "thou shalt not". It is the Garos' code of honour, comprising moral, civil, criminal and penal laws to match all their actions. Violation of these laws brings down the anger of the gods, but the criminal is also judged by the men of his tribe.

What are the moral laws of these children of the jungle? Everything which seems to them to disturb the harmonious relations of mankind—we should call it elementary *morality*. The morality of these kindly savages is so subtle that even voiced suspicion is punishable.

As I have said, adultery is severely punished among the Garos. If either of the spouses suspects the other of infidelity he, or she, makes public the name of the alleged lover. The latter must at once charge the accuser with false witness and take proceedings against him if he does not immediately prove his accusations. The Garos call this amita. All attempts at seduction by word, act or gesture are *monga-sala*—any ruse or behaviour calculated to attract a woman. "Making sheep's eyes" is *mikmalja*, catching hold of the wrist is *jak givok rimma*, touching the breast is *sok rimma* and 'playing footy footy' is *jasigasdapa*.

[1] Spirit.

Each of these venturesome gestures by a would-be lover is most reprehensible and a violation of the Garo laws of morality. If the woman or girl does not respond to these advances she may appeal to the village tribunal, which will decide on the fine to be paid to compensate for the insult or embarrassment.

In this grand jungle country where woman rules the laws to protect her are numerous. It would be impossible to recount them all. Many of them were told me by B.B. Marak in the course of our walks. They demonstrate the subtlety of Garo psychology. The uninvited approach to a woman with a view to fondling her bosom is a most serious offence if she is lying down, or in some position in which she cannot anticipate the act or defend herself. A too enterprising suitor must be careful or his audacity will cost him two pigs! When the use of physical violence, *sikdraa*, is proved, the man can be stoned and forcibly ejected from the village.

There are many other laws about adultery but they are bound up with the laws of marriage and involved in their infinite complications.[1] These all relate to the dakmalja prohibitions.

The civil, criminal and penal laws have undergone certain modifications since the arrival of the English and then the Indian administrations in the Garo Hills. But, except in the case of the law relating to the death penalty (which the Garos applied too ruthlessly for centuries), the Indian Government has refrained from interference and respects all the traditional laws of the Garos.

Lastly we come to the laws called nima, which in a way are the Garo rules of etiquette for about a dozen occasions. They seem so delightful that I feel I must set them out here. I follow the classification of Father Giulio Costa who has devoted a great deal of study to the Garos[2]. Transgression of these social rules means disgrace for the perpetrator and casts doubt on his morality, especially if he makes a habit of it.

So nima can be translated as "not permitted".

A few examples:

1. When walking along a path the women must always be behind the men unless wild animals, or some other danger, are about. Even then, only women and quite small girls may

[1] The Garo laws which were studied and annotated by the expedition will be the subject of another book. Laws relating to marriage and different modes of marriage and remarriage, to the inheritance of real and personal property, to the rights of possession enjoyed by the man and the woman, and the loss of those rights—all this is included in the vast classification which is dakmalja.

[2] *Antropos*, Volume 49, 1954.

walk in front. A wild beast generally attacks the person at the tail of the column.

2. In rivers or other bathing places it is usual to go into the water naked. So one must give notice of approach by shouting, singing or clearing one's throat and leave the bather sufficient time to cover the lower part of his body. If the bather is a woman she must have time to dress and get away.

3. When a man is about to pass a woman on a path he must make his presence known in some way. The woman then stops and faces the jungle while the man passes behind her. She cannot continue her journey until there is a considerable distance between them.

4. A woman must never sleep in the doorway of her house if there are men inside, even if they are of her own family. If she *must* walk past them she must be extremely careful to cover her posterior completely, whether with a piece of cloth, some handy object or her own hands.

5. Women and girls must never touch or carry garments belonging to their uncles or brothers. They must never walk past them when they are seated in the house, or even outside if they are near a wall.

6. A man must not wear or exchange clothes belonging to the husbands of his sisters or the brothers of his wife.

7. A woman must never offer rice from the bottom of the pot to a man, whether he is a member of the family or not.

8. A woman must never laugh or joke with the husbands of her sisters even in the presence of her own husband or other persons. The same rule applies to the father-in-law *vis-à-vis* the wives of his sons.

9. When drinking shubitshi, whether in public or private, the vessel must be offered to the oldest man first, whatever his social position in the community. A bearded man must have priority, whatever his age.

10. A woman must not enter the nokpanthé. On the day when her presence there is authorized she must go in by the back way and not by the ladder in front.

11. If an uncle goes out for a moment a nephew must not take his place.

12. Between the time of sowing and the first appearance of the corn in the ear no one must whistle on the paths leading to the fields or while at work in those fields.

Many of these rules of etiquette are common to several other peoples of south-east Asia.

IV

DAWN was breaking as nokma Dikkija finished his story and everyone crept off to bed.

Our immediate concern was our departure for Rangira.

The two elephants which we have used several times on our excursions round Allagiri can be equally useful for this expedition. B.B. Marak has already seen the mahouts who are quite agreeable. But this morning I overheard an animated discussion behind the house and guessed that he was fixing up terms with the drivers. The latter, who are Akawés, Garos from the plain, have had plenty of dealings with Assamese and Bengalis and learned the art of bargaining. The tracks are bad, the country is unhealthy, the loads are heavy. So, having had all night to think about it, the men have asked us twice the amount they were prepared to accept yesterday. Marak, quite unruffled, told them they would not get a rupee above the agreed sum. If they wanted to return to their village we would not stop them!

B.B. came over to my hut, knowing that I would find it hard to conceal my disgust at this sort of blackmail. An hour later the two mahouts came back all smiles. They would accept our terms provided that the expedition did not last more than a week. We refused to make any promises, but assured them that they would be paid at their daily rate for every day we needed them for our work. They agreed, with gloomy looks which left me with a feeling of foreboding.

They had to go off to find the elephants which were turned out into the jungle last night to get their supper. Though shackled, the animals had strayed a considerable distance and it was not easy to find them, despite the heavy wooden bells which betray the direction which they take. It was eleven o'clock before the mahouts reappeared with their mounts. It would take an hour to saddle and load them.

Marak, one mahout and I took the first elephant and Jean Naz, Peter and the other mahout the second. When everything was ready we set off, finding it very hard to leave our friends and Dikkija. At the last moment there was a chorus of cheerful farewells which were drowned in the stamping of the elephants and the barking of the village dogs. Before we knew it we had the river behind us and were entering the jungle, an alternation of green domes formed by the interlacing tops of tall bamboos and a tangle of trees clasped in the embrace of innumerable

creepers linked together to form aerial bridges above our heads.

Clumps of magnificent orchids hung down from the gnarled trunks of great giants. Pink, pure white and mauve lilies peered out from among the rotting leaves strewing the ground. Cradled by the indolent swaying of the elephants, which made our progress very slow, we gazed at this fantastic world with wondering eyes. With good going we could have made five or six kilometres an hour, but in the heart of the forest one was the limit.

The jungle, a complex of tree roots, writhing creepers and thorny rotten thickets, did its best to bar our passage. Yet despite the unremitting onslaught of the virgin forest it would have been a delightful ride but for the necessity to keep a sharp look-out to each side. My cornac's chopper was for ever on the whirl. Stout creepers, branches, and even whole trees fell down before us, and the elephant used his incredible strength to deal with anything that defied us. In his own cautious and unique fashion he put out his trunk, wrapped it round an awkward tree and either broke it in two or uprooted it, the loud crack sounding like a rifle shot. Invincible as he was, he had nothing to fear and we ourselves, clinging tight to our cushions, were concerned only to look out for the big *daman* leaves which positively scorch a bare neck, the *banderkeka* plant with haricot-shaped fruits and the clusters of hairy caterpillars which raise a sort of blister if you are unlucky enough to touch them. Snakes coiled round the upper branches of trees were difficult to see. Jean Naz, who has no fear of reptiles, caught one by giving it a smart tap on the vertebral column to stun it.

"I'll show it to you when we dismount. Its reflexes are marvellous!"

I loathe these creatures and the prospect of having one for a travelling companion was the reverse of attractive. I told Jean Naz to put it back in the jungle but he was not feeling obliging.

Hundreds of little leeches firmly glued themselves to us; only a pinch of salt or tobacco powder makes them let go and this is a job for the evenings in camp. Another very special menace is the red ants' nests, vast numbers of which hang down from branches like huge sacks. If you are unlucky enough to touch one thousands of the ruthless little beasts get all over you and bite fiercely with their powerful jaws. Their bite is extraordinarily painful. There is nothing for it but to strip to the skin, shake out your clothes or change and leave them behind. A shocking fever may well be the result of the bites.

And that was not all. Horrible tiny flies plagued us continuously, buzzing round our faces, ears and necks, while mosquitoes sucked our blood whenever they preferred it to the

elephants'. It takes that sort of trip to make anyone realize the bliss of arriving at your camp after ten or twelve hours of such exhausting travel.

At the moment when night, announced by the call of the tiger, caught us in the forest, we did not know where our next camp would be. I was curled up in my place next to B.B. Marak who was engaged in a discussion with the worried mahout. Through the branches we could see strange lights and the ground was glowing and sparkling. What we were seeing was not the lights of a village but enormous clumps of wood rotting in such a way that the fermenting elements produced the sort of phosphorescence which can be seen in tropical seas. A strange, supernatural glow, fascinating and impressive!

Everywhere else it was dark and nothing could be seen. This is the moment when you become a prey to vague terrors. The myriad mysterious night sounds are quite alarming, and how your discomfort is intensified if, like the Garos, you think of the country's legends and beliefs and feel surrounded by cruel and capricious spirits. I am no stranger to such panic.

So I was very relieved when we emerged from the forest. The full moon was gleaming on a broad river. On the opposite bank lights were twinkling.

"Renggigiri village—what we've been making for," said Marak.

We were rather late because the day was well advanced before we left Allagiri.

At the sensible pace of the elephants we crossed the river which was running fairly fast and nearly two metres deep. When we were half way over, surrounded by so much weird mystery and far from the noises of civilization, our ears were assailed by the strident sound of a gramophone! We could hardly credit it! Leaning forward over the watery mirror, I strained to catch the tune. It was Hindustani music, a record from the latest film success to come from the studios in Bombay!

B.B. Marak began to laugh and let out a long "oooh-ah" which echoed through the night. An answering cry, which seemed to be distant, came back from the bank. B.B. used his little electric torch and waved it up and down. Marvel of marvels! Another torch replied in morse.

We left our elephants near the bank and found ourselves in a little clearing in the midst of a charming collection of houses built on piles. We had never seen such an attractive lot and could imagine all the cotton bales stacked against the walls in the rear rooms. A score or so of the inhabitants received us with welcoming cries.

"Hallo, where do you come from?" was the greeting of a handsome young Indian, elegantly dressed in a suit of khaki cotton. A man of the world to the finger tips, he introduced himself: "R. L. Jatia, businessman from Manikachar, a small place in the District of Goalpara, wholesale cotton buyer." And I had been expecting this out-of-the-way corner to offer nothing but forest demons assembled for a nocturnal sabbat!

We introduced ourselves in turn and the young man exclaimed:

"I took you for missionaries on their rounds!"

It is evident that not many tourists are seen hereabouts.

Marak took us to visit the head man of the village, a fine old turbanned specimen, and we all went to his house where we found R. L. Jatia again.

"Will you have whisky, a glass of soda or orangeade?"

I plumped for the glass of fresh water which our new friend offered me, while our good B.B. Marak, beaming with pleasure, raised his glass: "There's a lot to be said for life in the bush!" he proclaimed.

The camaraderie of camp life was soon manifested in the high spirits all round. Fireworks, which Jatia had brought with him to distribute, were let off outside while this young Assamese disinfected the air with D.D.T. He is a *Marwari*, the rich business-man-cum-money-lender who comes from the Punjab and Rajasthan and has all the worthwhile trade of the country districts in his hands.

"I come to this village twice or three times a year to fetch my cotton," he explained. "I have three canoes not far from the quay where you arrived. I like jungle life."

I asked him which way he had come and he explained that it was very easy. This river, the Ganoï, flows through Damalgiri from which there is a good track between Tura and Manikachar which is passable for jeeps. At Manikachar, seventy kilometres from Damalgiri, the cotton is baled in Jatia's warehouses and transported by the river Jinjiram to the Brahmaputra and Dhubri.

The young trader went on to say that before the separation of India and Pakistan by "Partition" there was a good six-mile road between Manikachar and Rahumari-Steamer-Ghat on the Brahmaputra, a point of call for all boats going upstream to Assam or downstream to Calcutta. Nowadays Manikachar, which is on a tongue of land between the great river and the Garo Hills, has lost much of its importance, though it used to be the speediest route for clearing all the cotton from the mountain districts. The trails are overgrown and the landing-place is

Because Garo children have no toys, they treasure their puppies

A Garo woman winnowing the grain

sanded up, so Manikachar is isolated from the world for six or seven months of the year, for half of which it is the scene of disastrous floods. If the new trail from Tura which we used can defy the rains and landslides of the monsoon it will easily take all the traffic from the north. But it is very doubtful!

"Trade is much more difficult than it used to be and you have to undercut if you hope to succeed. Luckily I am young, and when I go home I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have learned a lot about the lives of folks around here."

"We must pay you a call some day," I said.

He laughed and fixed his eyes on me before he answered:

"I'm told our Marwari houses are quite comfortable. Would you like to come in the rainy season? We have nothing to do for several months and even the jute mills are shut down. I'll show you some photographs and poor amateur films I made with this." He produced an 8 mm. "Bell and Howell Magazine" camera.

Surprises never cease! I gratefully accepted his invitation. If we are free when the time comes, why not?

After a lot more talk we got to sleep at a very late hour, lulled by the subdued hummings of a woman somewhere in the village and enjoying the fragrance of the frangipanis.

When we woke in the morning our friend had gone. He had vanished at dawn, leaving us his card with an invitation to Manikachar.

It was a bright and beautiful morning and birds with hues of the deepest blue or pure gold were flashing across the calm, sunny sky. In a gap disclosing a wonderful horizon of hill and forest, clouds were piling round a domed peak—Rangira, for which we were making—considerably higher than its neighbours.

We took our leave after thanking the nokma for his hospitality. For days to come we should have nothing to expect but the hazards of the jungle and nothing to rely on save ourselves, as we did not anticipate stopping at any villge short of Rangiragiri at the foot of the mountain five days' journey away.

Our ride through a green paradise alongside a tributary of the Ganoï warmed our hearts. We passed quite close to a little village belonging to the Rangiragiri group, but the news of our approach had already circulated and the timid, apprehensive inhabitants, little used to such visits, had fled into the bush.

The spears fixed at the entrance of the village were an unmistakable intimation that we were warned off. It was the first time that the proud mountain tribes had given us such a reception. Responding to orders, the elephants cleared a passage

through the banana bushes forming a vast wall round the village. The sagacious beasts could not resist the temptation to break off a few and carry them away in their trunks.

The first day was marked by the death of a panther, shot by Jean Naz, and in the evening we camped under the stars at the side of the track where the slope begins. We had nothing to do but prepare our simple meal and clean the skin of our splendid animal. The mahouts grumbled that the carcase would attract a tiger so Marak and I had to hang it nearly two kilometres away to allay their fears. Peter was shivering with fever again and seemed to regret having come with us.

The next morning we left at dawn, firmly resolved to find a camping site before nightfall, as there is nothing more dismal than fixing up camp quarters in the dark when you cannot see exactly where you are. The night is full of invisible presences and it is impossible to sleep soundly.

The steep slope was intersected by ravines and I admired the way in which the elephants made steps for their enormous feet in places where the rise was almost vertical. The wet ground often slid away from under them but they took no notice and nothing seemed to bother them. They carried on as directed by their mahouts, who have an astonishing gift for finding their way in these inextricable thickets, a green labyrinth impenetrable to a man on his own.

By the evening of the second day we had reached a vast plain, a marshy bowl surrounded by little wooded hills. There was a big lake in the middle. Although the ground was soft and sticky we all agreed to make camp there before the sun went down.

Once again there was an indignant outburst from the mahouts. Fine sort of place to spend the night!

To be frank, the spot was far from inviting, with the shades of night beginning to cover it like a mantle.

But the prospect of going on was equally unattractive. Jean told me that Peter's teeth were chattering and he must be the victim of some horrible fever. Darong and he had to hold him firmly to prevent him falling off the elephant. The mahouts refused to dismount so we had no option but to go on.

We set off, facing the dying sun, to climb the mountain and discover the reverse slope on the far side of its bald crest. Around us was nothing but a tumble of peaks and ahead of us forest after forest stretched to the darkening horizon. To our relief we spied a little village, a collection of huts among newly cleared fields with a sprinkling of burnt tree trunks. Smoke was rising. We threaded our way through a bamboo thicket, descending to a spot where the forest stopped at the silver ribbon of a little

stream sparkling in the dying light. But we caught sight of a *bolpil*, that well-known sign of death. In Garo country the traveller is always advised when some important person has died in the village he is approaching. A sort of carved pillar, called a "bolpil", is placed on the main trail about a quarter of a mile from the first huts.

Should we have to sheer off again? Marak consulted the mahouts, but this time they were in favour of calling a halt.

A man appeared, attracted by the trumpeting of the elephants which had smelt the smoke. After a long and careful examination the native gave us a friendly greeting, though there was an apprehensive and almost hostile look in his eyes. Marak bravely plunged into the attack with a flood of hasty words. We had come a long way, were in a sorry state and would have to leave at dawn for another long day's travel. Yes, he knew that it was not the custom in these parts for strangers to enter a village which death had visited first, but we would try not to stray beyond the bounds of any place assigned for our camp.

Our eyes fixed on the man of the woods, we waited in silence. After some moments of hesitation he turned his back on us without a word and walked towards some huts.

"He's gone to consult the others," Marak whispered.

A little later he came back with an escort of women and children and announced that we could stay in his village. He had no objection to our presence, provided that when we left at dawn we took with us any evil spirits which might have followed us.

Aching in every joint, we dismounted and silently rigged up our tent on the open space in the middle of the village. Our only concern at the moment was to settle in and fix our mosquito nets; swarms of these insects were buzzing unpleasantly round our ears. Marak had told me that he would set the inhabitants' fears at rest and he went off to talk to the man who seemed to be the chief. When he came back we had finished our work and Peter, installed in the annexe of the tent, was wandering, the victim of an acute attack of malaria. We were in a critical situation, as in view of his condition I saw no possibility of getting away for several days.

Marak was accompanied by the headman and two other villagers, both fine, handsome figures. They were Machis, the tribe inhabiting the tops of these hills.

"We're on excellent terms and these men offer us their services. No one else is available, as all the others are busy with the deceased."

The nokma's son had been killed by a tree he was felling.

"I think we'll be invited to the funeral ceremonies," continued Marak while we were sitting down to an excellent *bouillon à la française* prepared by Naz from our Liebig packets. (He had even made some pies with tomato sauce, a culinary *chef d'oeuvre* which represented our finest menu and a reward for our long day's labours).

"That is exactly why I've cooked such a good dinner," he said; "I can see us keeping vigil in this haunt of nasty demons."

We suddenly heard someone blowing the *adil*[1] and a faint sound of drums came to our ears. There were three blasts on the horn, followed by a silence and then more blasts.

The Garos say that within the human body dwells a spirit which only waits release from its mortal envelope to cleave its way to Mangru-Mangram, the eternal home of the spirits. But they are very vague about where that eternal home is, and possibly there is more than one. Chikmang, an isolated peak south-east of the Garo Hills near to the river Someswari, gets the most votes.

Mangru-Mangram is a sort of purgatory through which all men, good and bad alike, have to pass, doing the same sort of work in the next world as they were doing before and without any idea of punishment or reward; the Garos are born without any "original sin" complex. On arrival, the deceased finds out where any relations who have predeceased him and not yet returned to earth are living, builds his house close to theirs and lives among them. This imaginary region is anything but a pleasure resort and so everyone anxiously looks forward to a speedy departure to happy reincarnation.

The most elaborate provision must be made for the needs of the deceased on his long journey to Mangru-Mangram. He must have a guide and all the money and other necessities he would require for a journey on earth.

On their way, the spirits rest for several days by a pool called Bahmang ("the place where the spirit eats his midday meal" or "the pool which is black as night").

In days of yore the relatives of a rich man made every effort to provide a slave to accompany the deceased on his journey to faraway lands, but in these days a fowl or pig is the victim.

It is a very bad sign to see a *do'mang* (nightjar) on the roof of a house in which someone is ill. It is thought that the bird has come to warn him to prepare for his journey to the next world. As soon as the kamal has announced that despite all the

[1] A musical instrument made from a buffalo horn which figures prominently at funerals.

care and attention he has lavished on the invalid it is beyond his power to cure him, the dying man is practically abandoned by his relations. So great is the fear of the spirits of death that the bonds of kinship and affection are loosened.

Nawang, "the lord of the road for souls", is lurking in the background and in his haste to snatch away the spirit of the dying man may easily make a mistake and seize one of the living! To keep him away, the villagers yell at the top of their voices, the drums beat and the horns are blown fortissimo before death comes to claim the sufferer in the midst of this infernal din. It is not good to remain in a comatose state for long; the Garos believe that as soon as Nawang has got possession of his victim he begins to eat him. Then the consternation of the relatives is such that the dying man is thrown on to the funeral pyre before life is extinct.

The demon covets the deceased's belongings, particularly the earrings of which every Garo wears a large number. They all know that "the lord of the road for souls" dearly loves these trinkets. So when the cunning demon tells the spirit to take them off and hand them over the latter must recognize him and immediately throw down a handful of the rings with which he has been abundantly supplied. While the demon is picking them up the spirit takes to his legs (if that expression be permitted). The duration of detention at Chikmang and the process of release seem to depend on the cause of death or the sins committed on earth. Those who have taken their own lives by hanging return in the lowly form of an insect which can live only on the sap of the tree from which the fatal rope was made. Those who drowned themselves become fish. If death has been caused by an elephant or tiger, the deceased will be reincarnated in an elephant or tiger. The reward for a good life is the prospect of a second existence as a human being. Those who have passed a blameless life may even be reborn into their own clan.

A murderer cannot return until after the lapse of seven generations in his victim's family.

The Garo thinks that animals also have a spirit which goes to Chikmang after death. The funeral ceremonies, and the way in which domestic animals are treated in these parts, are strong evidence of such a belief. They are loved and cared for like children, sharing their owners' lives and even their meals. I shall never forget the look of hatred a little girl gave me when I picked up her grey cat, a creature with two dark slits for eyes. I gave it back and she tenderly laid it down swathed in the strip of cloth her mother used to carry her little brother about.

The only animals not eaten by the Garos are cats and parrots

kept as pets, but even if the others are not so fortunate they are treated with as much respect and affection as members of the family while they are alive.

The Garos have the highest reverence for their ancestors and their dead, though there is not the slightest element of ancestor-worship in their customs and all the altars in the villages are dedicated to the numerous deities they honour. Some of these altars are the remains of structures set up in the days following cremations. There are few stranger mourning figures than the *kima*, carved in a block of wood which is stuck into the ground. Pieces of material, turbans, gourds, and little baskets are hung from them and in many cases the upper part is fashioned as a human face, tattooed with the emblems of the next world and crowned with bunches of fresh cotton to attract benevolent spirits.

For some time after a death the Garos fear that a dead man may return, so immediately after the cremation they worship him from time to time so that he will not trouble those he has left behind. There is a sort of tacit understanding between Mangru-Mangram and the physical world, the mediator being these extraordinary kima.

All the ceremonies we witnessed that night were carried out in accordance with Machi tradition. The corpse was left in the house for two days. It had been carefully washed in shubitshi[1] and laid out on gongs with a rupee in each hand and a pillow of cotton flox under the head. A chicken was tied to one of its toes by a long thread, which enabled it to move about. This fowl, called *do'jasi*, represented the slave of earlier times. After the cremation it would be sacrificed and its blood sprinkled over the *delang*, the altar erected close to the house.

It is customary to fill a little basket with uncooked rice and place it with a gourd of millet spirit by the deceased's head. The floor is strewn with numerous cooked meats, and various possessions, such as his forest *dao*, clothes and trinkets, are hung round him.

For two days and nights the body is watched over by weeping women—in that respect Garo women do not differ from any others. The funeral dirge is a recital of the merits of the departed as well as a prayer for him to reach his goal without mishap. He may have been killed by accident and had no time to choose, so that his spirit may be wandering about for ever. The family chooses for him and sacrifices a second fowl on the delang.

[1] If the deceased had been less well-off it would have been washed in water only.

While the house was buzzing with doleful and monotonous murmurs one of the singers, a near relation, slowly and solemnly beat the ground with a weaving shuttle while another kept time on a little cymbal.

The oldest mourner called on Megam Aripa, the first man to die, and warned the spirit against the cunning Nawang and the thousand and one dangers of the long trail to Chikmang. Then the dead man's mother advanced and gave him her last instructions, in particular to take careful note of the route he is to follow so that he can find his way back to the maternal home when the time comes for him to be released from the abode of the spirits.

While we were watching these proceedings a fearful noise from a dark corner of the house made me jump. Some youths emerged, dressed in the skins of wild beasts. Their purpose was to frighten the women and so prevent them from falling asleep. It was an alarming and yet moving spectacle to see these men in their rough tiger, leopard, bear or goat skins, their faces smeared with rice flour or ashes, dancing, shouting and indulging in deliberately obscene gestures round the corpse. Their leader was decorated with shredded banana leaves. Among them was a curious individual looking like a scorpion.

"The *mankram*," Marak explained, "a giant insect, personifying sin."

"What's the significance of the dance," asked Naz, "apart from the idea of keeping the women awake?"

"I don't know," replied Marak, lost in thought. "We always do it. Always . . ."

The corpse was carried to the pyre, but before it was set alight the relations formed up in procession, the father clasping a tuft of cock's feathers. They made their way to the house of the young man's mother and laid the feathers on the piece of wood which, when carved, will be the kima. The meaning of this ceremony is simple. The spirit of the deceased will return to earth one day; if there is nothing to distinguish his house he may not find it or may mistake it for another—which would cause the greatest inconvenience to everyone.

The time for the cremation arrived. The corpse was laid on the *ganchi* erected in the atela, the little village meeting-place. The ganchi consists of four posts forming a rectangle within which the firewood is piled. The four outer faces of the ganchi have a peculiar form of ornamentation—T shaped boards, sixty centimetres by thirty, on which human and animal figures are drawn in a mixture of blood and soot. B.B. Marak tapped me on the shoulder.

"Those boards will be taken away when the relations light the fire."

Sure enough, the procession came to a halt and one of the dead man's brothers removed the boards which had aroused my curiosity and laid them on the ground near the sacrificial altar.

"What is the idea of the boards, Marak?"

"They're a sort of ornament," he said.

The fire crackled. Nauseated by its smell, I fled to my tent and Naz followed me.

I could not remember all the details of the ceremony we had witnessed and my colleague helped with my notes. We were working by lamplight until very late in the evening. From time to time Marak looked in and filled up gaps. The corpse was very slow in burning and the bystanders threw several brass earrings on the ganchi; Nawang covets them and will be tempted to pick them up and leave the dead man's spirit to depart in peace, for the moment has come for it to leave the body.

The atmosphere was very unpleasant. There was a damp smell mingled with the odour of rotting vegetation. The humidity from the marshes, so numerous hereabouts, dripped on the roof of the tent and on the dying fires which our servants had lit, while the fires in the ganchi had to be stoked up continuously. There was every variety of smell as various fats and resins were being burnt. Perhaps the most penetrating odour was that from the pure spirit with which the cremation mound was sprinkled.

"Why do they keep up such a blaze?"

"The flames help the spirit on its hard journey."

"Why do they use such tough and slow-burning wood?"

"Because it's good wood, so that the spirit won't have bad health in its next reincarnation. There are various reasons why certain woods will not do. *Simul* is thought to bring the spirit bad luck; *boldak* causes itching as it mingles with the remains of the deceased; *agachi* means grief and tears in the great beyond and the life to follow because it is full of moisture and sap."

Marak persuaded us to go outside for a few minutes. The spectacle had become too much for European sensibilities. A bull was being tied up near the pyre. Unlike the fowl sacrificed on the delang it did not symbolize the slave of former times but represented the good friend on whom a man can rely. When the last remains of the corpse were about to disintegrate the animal was killed and immediately cut up. Masses of entrails, a viscous

mess of crimson tinged with green, fell out over banana leaves placed to receive them while naked children gaped and screamed with delight.

Bowls of liquor were brought up as the fury of the orchestra mounted. Everyone got drunk. Only the headman, a calm, dignified, wrinkled figure showing his toothless gums in a mysterious smile, stood rooted to the spot. And then, on this weird night, voices were raised in the most pathetic of all dirges—the lament of the mother for her lost son.

"Oh father! rest for a moment!"

B.B. Marak explained:

"The reference is to the dead who will be called *apa*, 'father', or *do-ma*, 'the black cormorant', throughout."

"*On the way to Chikmang*
Beware of Nawang, father of the spirit Rikshibin . . .
Nawang, the lord of the road for souls.
They who protect me are my sons!
They who guard me as with a shield,
They who ward off danger from my head!
But the shield has fallen to the ground.
Thou wert strong against the might of the hail,
Thou didst defy the storm."

"And now," said Marak, "the comparison continues with the finest of the trees to emphasis the beauty and power of death."

"*Apa, have the spirits broken my life?*
Do-ma, have they broken off the tender shoots from my branches?
The spirits have destroyed my bird with a little knife,
With a little knife my life has been severed.
My Do-ma has been killed!"

Marak explained that the emphasis on the knife being small was to make the audience realize the sudden horror of the young man's death, having been killed at once by the fall of a tree.

"*Yet in my life thou wert as the only fine tree on earth, Oh my son!*
As the only stone in the river, Oh Do-ma!
The only stone on which I could walk in crossing the torrent.
I was still the bull, and thou could'st be my soft hump and my branching horns. . . .

Notwithstanding his beauty,
My child has been torn away from my warmth.
And thou, Do-ma, whom I bore, I must bear thee away, dead,

And thou, Apa, whom I held in my arms, I must see thee lying lifeless!
Return, if only for a moment, and sit near me, stand before me that I may admire thee once more!
Have I gazed on thee long enough?
Rise and stand before me, Oh Do-ma!
Tell me, why dost thou sleep?
Oh tell me why thine eyes are heavy with sleep!
Is it because the spirit Salgira has given thee the plant of sleep?
Or Nokmani Susimé[1] *has brought thee the plant of dreams?*
Oh son, follow thy road without turning aside. Stray not in strange regions . . .
The waters of the Nengba are not to be trusted. Stray not like a lost buffalo.
Seek Chikmang by the road thy father trod before thee,
Reach the limpid waters of Bahmang by the ways trod by hundreds of thy family and thy clan.
Apani nikkil tijiko nigawé!
Father! walk looking round thee with eyes wide open,
Walk with a happy smile on thy lips.
As for myself, I shall go my way, passing all the villages snapping my fingers,
Facing the world with lowered eyes, shameful of being childless!
Oh son! behind me my shame will be my shame and my grief beyond cure;
Now I roam the world biting my fingers. . . ."

Next Day

Marak, smiling in his own kindly way, called me this morning. Naz had been up for some hours, but preferred to leave me in peace, though some interesting things have happened.

At an early hour the nokma went to the fire, which is still smouldering, taking a cooking-pot, some rice and fresh water shrimps. He cooked it all on the ashes and when it was ready broke the pot and uttered a cry of grief so loud and doleful that Jean was astonished that it had not woken me.

This meal for the departed spirit is known as the "ghost's rice". Marak explained the significance of the shrimps. Another legend is involved:

"When Megam Aripa, the first man to die, came home after his reincarnation, he found his wife engaged in boiling some shrimps which she had got from the river. When the mother, widow or nearest female relation catches shrimps and offers them on the funeral pyre, her object is to give the deceased a

[1] The moon.

chance to return home, i.e. to be reincarnated in the same clan."

When we caught up with the nokma he was carefully picking out the bones from the ashes.

The various tribes have different methods of preserving the bones. The Chisaks and Machis put them in a pot hung from the *maljuri* post of the dead man's house. A stick is notched and placed between the floor and the post. The notches make a minute staircase which the spirit can use if it wishes to rejoin its bones. The daily offerings of rice are made at the little altar containing the bones until the post-funeral rites are over, which will not be for two months.

As a rule the bones are divided among the near female relatives who drape them round their bodies and appear thus adorned whenever there is any dancing during the festivities. Ultimately the macabre relics are taken into the jungle and buried, preferably by the banks of a stream.

The Abengs do not distribute the bones but burn the little pot; the dances and jollifications are the same as among the Machis and Chisaks.

Darong, who has lived for a long time among the Rugas and Chiboks, has been telling me of other rites quite as extraordinary. The funeral ceremonies last for several weeks and hunting in the jungle alternates with offerings and sacrifices. The deceased is believed to be present at all celebrations in his honour and it is everyone's duty to be and look cheerful. The Rugas and Chiboks do not place the altar for the reception of the bones inside a house but in a bamboo tied to a tree from which floats a piece of white cloth like a standard. When the time for the post-funeral ceremonies arrives the women wear their *penta*, particularly heavy ear-rings which are designed to enlarge the lower lobe of the ear. At the conclusion of the festival the bamboo containing the bones is burned while the women are executing a new dance in honour of the deceased.

Chibok villages look very peculiar as members of that tribe have a custom that after the post-funeral ceremonies mandal branches are planted alongside the main path leading to the houses; as these branches easily take root the result is a long and wonderfully shady alley, each tree representing a departed inhabitant.

It is only after all the ceremonies are concluded that the kima is planted in the ground in front of the dead man's house. It remains there until it collapses or turns to dust without ever being moved or touched, even if the village is abandoned.

The village of Rangiragiri lay under our eyes, making a bright

pattern in the sunlight against the dark green velvet of the forest, and to our relief the sound of human activities greeted our ears. The sky was cloudless; we were very tired and slipped from our mounts to find ourselves the centre of an excited and noisy crowd.

B.B. Marak began a hymn of praise in honour of the inhabitants. Naz would have liked to join in, but all that came from his lips was a grating sound, thanks to a sharp attack of laryngitis for which damp nights in the jungle were responsible. His voice seemed to come from the bottom of a cave.

There was nothing at Rangiragiri with which we were not already familiar, even to the small group in the centre of the village who seemed to be in charge. The nokma was ill and a great sacrifice was in progress, to the accompaniment of the roll of drums and guttural cries. We at once took refuge in the bandasal while our Peter, helped by Darong, set up the tent. It looked as though visitors of our calibre were something of a rarity and I had an idea that we inspired confidence. We had frequently noticed that, so far from being an embarrassment, the presence of a woman allayed suspicion, gave confidence and even aroused friendly interest. Rice spirit was forthcoming and we enjoyed producing our glasses. The warm drink was very comforting and I will admit that we needed a few mouthfuls to revive us. There could be no question of sleep—the villagers would not have understood the suggestion—especially during an *amia*.[1]

An ox had been sacrificed at dawn that morning and the altar was splashed with its blood. A man was scraping the hide preparatory to laying it out to dry and another was tying a little black goat to a bamboo. Some women were cooking a meal for the whole village which had assembled in the nokma's house. Laid out on bamboo leaves on the ground were hunks of beef and the offal which is used to make curry.

I noticed an odd feature about the cooking. Hung above the iron pots were little strainers made of bamboo filled with wood ash. Water is poured drop by drop on this ash and it falls into the food, taking with it the mineral salts which are so necessary to life. There is no salt in Garo country, any more than there can have been in their original home, so this method of cooking must be an age-old process; it is a triumph of primitive ingenuity. The Garos know nothing about using fats for roasting meat. Everything is cooked in a pot, with lavish use of water, pimentos, various spices and little green seeds with a bittersweet taste.

[1] General term for any ceremony.

We were conducted to the house where the nokma received us. The kamal, sitting under the wall near which the blood-stained altar was placed, was holding in his right hand the *gamipong*, a sort of bamboo cross, rather long and decorated with small leaves, bells and white cock feathers like those in his head-dress. He waved it about without stopping while murmuring monotonous phrases in verse lasting several minutes, punctuated by a piercing cry. On the floor at his feet were little dishes containing different foods, uncooked rice, curry, pieces of meat. From time to time a man sitting by a wall rose up to sprinkle food on the ground and pour spirit over the six gongs placed in two rows opposite the kamal. We had never seen anything like this before. We were given small portions of the victuals (which eventually we should have to eat!) and the ceremony continued.

The kamal seized a small chicken at his feet, plucked out some feathers, rubbed them in hot ash from the fire and uttered loud incantations. He rose, sprinkled spirit over everything in the house, including ourselves, the food and the gongs. Then he sat down and began to eat.

To tell the truth, it was revolting to see him stuffing his fingers into his mouth, smacking his lips and clicking his tongue. The sight took away all my hunger. Marak came to the rescue:

"Wait a bit."

In a moment we should be going to see the sacrifice of the little black goat. Meanwhile the guests had to rinse out their mouths (making a lot of noise) and smoke their bubbling water pipes.

The invalid went outside to sit on a little bamboo mat and smoke. The kamal, still armed with his ornate cross, continued his incantations before the altar while the goat, little suspecting its approaching fate, nibbled the fresh leaves. The ceremony of sacrificing the fowl began. The mylam was sharpened while horns were blown and the tam-tams resumed their wild drumming in the house. The priest touched the invalid with the fowl, then slit the skin of its belly with his knife and let the blood fall on to the bamboos and leaves of the altar.

Reading the poor bird's entrails, the kamal pronounced that the nokma's illness would be short. The fowl, still alive, was then dispatched.

Before the goat was sacrificed it had to be given a little exercise. To drive away the evil spirits which might have their home within it the kamal made it walk round the altar two or three times and as it passed the priest he gave it a blow with his gamipong. This part of the proceedings was terminated by a

light meal of leaves soaked in spirit and then the animal was bathed in water. Its throat was then cut over a banana leaf and its ears and the tuft of hairs on its tail went to decorate the altar. Some of its blood, mixed with rice flour, was offered to the invalid and the rest was sprinkled over the altar.

The remainder of the ceremony was confined to incantations. The pitiless sun beating on the nokma's head made him sponge himself with a resigned air from time to time.

When all the out-of-door rites had been completed the kamal walked backwards into the house, keeping his eyes fixed on the altar. Indoors there was an acrid smell and flies were dancing above the food liberally distributed over the floor. There was more to come. Jars of liquor were brought in and emptied on the ground and over piles of cooked rice.

I heard Jean gasping: "This is too much!"

His glass was filled and it would have been discourteous not to empty it. Though the smell of squashed curry and spilt beer, not to mention the heat, was beginning to make us feel ill there could be no question of leaving, or refusing further food or drink.

The kamal started to dance the *grika*, flourishing his mylam and shield and everyone sat down and ate off the filthy floor! But we had not come to the end of our troubles. Marak told us that after the feast there would be dancing.

"Aren't they going to sweep the floor first?" asked Jean.

What an absurd idea! The rice was there to be stamped on and everyone had to join in as soon as the priest gave the signal. There was a yell. The great moment had come! All the villagers rose and began to pound the floor with their naked feet, squashing the rice and curry. Gongs banged, the fury of the tam-tams redoubled and flutes joined in. A muffled sound of singing, interrupted Garo-fashion by strangled cries, filled the house. The stench became intolerable. I was very sorry that Mukherjee was not there.

> *"We are warriors, the clan of warriors, the matchong of warriors! Ka Marak[1]! clan of warriors, we are warriors! Our relatives are brave, they are warriors, sons of a family of warriors. Ka Marak! We too are warriors, our children are brave! Ama raka apa raka!"*

At that moment the nokma announced that he was feeling much better and came and sat by us, smiling to himself. The dance continued as night fell outside.

[1] Ka=bravo! If they had been Sangmas, it would have been "Ka Sangma".

During the three days we have been at Rangiragiri we have failed to get any information about the leper. B.B. Marak assures us that he lives round here. But our inquiries have to be particularly discreet because we have to find our man without betraying in what way he is peculiar. The Garos never refer to diseases of this kind which they consider a sort of marang. They are afraid that after death the victim will avenge himself on anyone who has betrayed his infirmity. So Marak has told us to be careful.

Meanwhile we have been making inquiries about the old custom of head-hunting, still in vogue in this corner of the Garo Hills. I should say that we have never come across so much quarrelling as in these Machi villages. There is at least one quarrel every night and they are notably violent.

Since the coming of Indian independence and the introduction of a new administrative code for the tribes a cadre of *laskars* has been formed to act as rural police and benevolent magistrates, with authority to deal on the spot with cases of trivial importance. These laskars can call the villagers together and hold court, inflicting fines and awarding compensation to injured parties, in accordance with long-established custom. In former times trial by ordeal was the current method of settling disputes. Even today duels with knives—incidentally, we have seen some—are a survival of these trials by ordeal. It seems that wounds received on these occasions are treated with a herb called *dika*, which can be translated as "herb to wipe out injury". Two enemies desiring a reconciliation must eat the same dika leaf—a better fate than decapitation!

I asked Bokseng,[1] a young villager with whom I had struck up a friendship, whether he remembered any of these famous blood feuds.

Yes, he remembered heads dripping with blood, crucified hands, scalps and the shrieks of triumph. But I find it hard to believe that his generation has ever used the old-fashioned swords except to sacrifice oxen and cattle. Despite the excited gleam in his eyes and their faraway look, I could not help wondering whether what he recalled was anything more than what he had heard from his forebears. You should see the wrapt attention with which the young drink in their senior's words!

I gazed intently at my young friend as he hollowed out his canoe, and from the expression on his face and the sound of his voice it was easy to see that the memory of such exploits resurrected in him the cruel pride of his race.

The great tree he had selected was lying near the river, felled

[1] *Bok*, something white, *seng*, something bright or shining.

at the level of his shoulders. His axe rose and fell, leaves, creepers and branches scattered in all directions and insects fled. The jungle resounded with dull thuds which petered out in echoes or stopped short, for no apparent reason, at an invisible barrier. He was wearing the traditional turban, adorned with two toucan feathers, and he had carefully tattooed two or three blue lines on his face—a custom which is now dying out. He went on patiently hollowing, and the pattern of the future canoe was gradually emerging. It will be given heat treatment and when it is finished will go down the river with its cargo of cotton bales.

"It's plain that we did wrong," he said, "but between you and me it was necessary all the same. There are many things going on in this village which would not have happened in our fathers' time!"

Two or three weeks ago at Damalgiri market he bought a shirt and khaki shorts which have probably come from stocks left after the Anglo-Japanese war. I am told that he came back with a gloomy air which has not left him since. I tried to find out the reason. He had been cheated by a Bengali trader, who swore at him when he protested, violently, no doubt, and perhaps clutching his dao.

"His head oughtn't to be on his shoulders," Bokseng said, with a cruel gleam in his eyes.

"Why? That custom is very much out of date!"

"Mem-sahib, as long as your enemy is alive you have no peace, but when you have killed him you can sleep at night!"

"You mean to say you would have killed him?"

"Of course, but now it seems I should be hung—a thing I do not understand at all."

Bokseng is the Garo who is to take us to see Mikat Sangma[1] the leper.

This morning I was having a bath in the rear annexe of our big tent when Naz called out from outside:

"Look out, somebody's trying to get a peep from under the double roof."

The presence of my companion did not deter the men at all and when I showered them with water they merely roared with laughter and came out into the open, climbing into what we pretentiously call our "bathroom". I could only snatch a bath robe, sit on a pile of logs and join in their fun. A little girl of twelve or thirteen joined the party and enjoyed herself comparing her skin, coloured to the lovely tints of burnt clay, with mine. I called Marak and asked what was being said about us.

[1] *Mi*—rice, *kat*—to cut = time to cut the rice.

It appears that all the women of the village are full of admiration for me because I have come from the depths of the jungle to visit them. They have never seen anyone like us and while allowing that we are human they consider us a species quite different from their own and endowed with a multitude of things which are very fine but merely provoke their laughter. Our big tent, for instance. When we first erected it the whole village came out and slowly gathered round as if approaching some animal they were afraid of frightening by some brusque gesture. For a whole hour they stayed at a respectful distance and then some of the men came up and touched the tent with their hands, uttering cries of surprise.

We were lying on our camp beds and eventually they all crept in and squatted on the ground, exactly as they do in their own huts. After an interval a man who was the next in line of importance after the nokma asked why we did not build a bamboo house like theirs;

"It's so easy, and they don't go soft in the rain like cotton stuff does. . . ."

To convince him that our tent material was rainproof nothing less than monsoon rains would have sufficed!

At night we decided to set off with Bokseng to find the leper, who lives on top of a hill some five miles from the village. We left the camp in charge of Peter, Darong and the mahouts and proceeded in Indian file under a starless sky though the night was bright with glow worms, which seemed to guide our steps. Reaching a series of crests on which lights could be seen, a strange vision, dominating the jungle around us, suddenly presented itself to our gaze. A high, dark, crenellated wall stood out against the sky.

"Rangira," whispered Marak.

He too seemed greatly moved and I had to pull myself together to master my fears; two persons were coming towards us, carrying resin torches and muffled up in a kind of light-coloured shroud. I realized that they were the lepers.

"So you've come! We were beginning to get worried," said one of the ghosts in English. We could not see his face because he kept it away from the light.

"Why did you worry?" asked Marak.

"We have several tiger traps around here and there's a herd of wild elephants on the loose not far away."

"I know where they are," said Bokseng, "and there's nothing to fear."

"Ah, so it's you," exclaimed the same man, who spoke in a

very melodious voice. "With him you will never be in danger; the boy with you is a demon created to scare away all the spirits in these parts. So you made up your minds to see me! It's very brave of you and I congratulate you; my retreat is remote!"

Then the leper turned to Marak:

"I got your message, but my observer in the village fell into a ravine returning from his fields rather late and a little drunk. I had to find some way of getting you here and was unsuccessful. But thanks to Bokseng you're here, and that's all that matters."

"The fact is," replied B.B., "that I decided to follow him because no one was very keen to guide us to you on account of our European friends. Everyone is still afraid that you'll give more trouble. These people are so ignorant about everything that goes on outside their own village!"

"Yes indeed," the man said with a sigh. "When I was a militant politician against the British they often hid me and our jungle was very convenient. Now they mount futile guard over the last lair of an aged and diseased wild beast."

I had an idea that the phantom made some sort of demonstration, perhaps waving his arms. The unearthly voice went on:

"Come and sit under the frangipanis. I've made some rattan chairs which are as comfortable as if I'd got them from Park Street in Calcutta."

Our visit to Mikat Sangma and the story of his life remain the most unusual and moving of my memories.

Mikat Sangma's activities as politician and conspirator have been going on for several years.[1] He is the type of patriot who is always in revolt against established authority and therefore supported by its opponents. Brought up by an English missionary who in a sense adopted him, he succeeded in obtaining a degree in law at Calcutta University. Subsequently he forsook his master's ethical path and proclaimed himself chief of a whole district to the south of the Garo Hills, thus getting into trouble with English authorities functioning in that area outside the jungle which is now Pakistani territory. Having failed to get his title recognized he was charged with sedition, arrested and thrown into prison. He escaped, "took to the mountains" (as they say round here) and declared himself the enemy of all who denied him the authority he claimed. Seeing him adopt such a political position, the religious sects who had been protecting him abandoned him. Mikat proclaimed himself the champion of the territorial independence of the Garo Hills. He attracted a band of followers and from his hiding-place in

[1] All the facts in this chapter have been recorded in the Indian Press.

the mountain jungles he not only initiated political movements but carried out armed attacks. After the recent partition of India was effected he resumed his political rôle. He advocated that the Pakistan frontier should be withdrawn thirty miles, i.e. he opposed the division of the area occupied by the Garos into two zones, one of which is in Pakistan. How can anyone blame him for that? What can be more absurd than to separate these little peoples who are ethnically one? At the present time communications and supply in the Garo Hills district are suffering very severely from the division, having regard to the fact that what is grown on the northern slopes of the mountains is not grown on the southern. The products of the two areas are, of course, exchanged at the frontiers but anyone found there who has no business to be there is hauled off to gaol before he knows what is happening to him!

The Central Government has had to put a stop to the activities of Mikat Sangma and he has had to retire to his lair on Rangira, from which he is unlikely to emerge. Not that his health is bad. He treats himself with an Indian plant known from earliest times: it is a sort of bixaceus,[1] from the fruit of which we get chaulmoogra oil.

For centuries the Indians have believed in the efficacy of a plant capable of curing leprosy and this herb was in fact the only known remedy until the Americans produced D.D.S.[2] More than two hundred cases have been successfully treated at the leper hospital at Tura kept by the nuns of Saint François Xavier.

Mikat Sangma talked to us all night without getting tired and much of what he told us appears somewhere or other in this book. He was to send me some further stories as it was impossible for me to get down all the epic legends and poems of the Garos from his dictation. At the moment of writing[3] the present government of Assam has prohibited the export of such information until further order with the object of enriching the archives of the Assam tribes or the works of the ethnologist they select.

Here is one of the legends I owe to Mikat:

THE ORIGIN OF FERMENT FOR MAKING RICE SPIRIT

"In days of old there was no rice spirit, nor any other liquor to gladden the heart of man. No one knew how to make them because the ferment was unknown.

[1] *Hydnocarpus.*

[2] 4-4 diamino diphenyl sulphone.

[3] January 1956.

"It was Misi Noebale who invented the ferment for making spirit. He gave this substance to Sangma Tottengma and the woman Ahnyng Bokjare got it from him. She wrapped it in banana leaves and placed the package on a raised platform behind the house. Of course all this happened in the nether regions. Now Korengpa stole the ferment, carried it up to earth and put it on the top of a giant simul.

"Another woman called Elonggi saw the ferment, had the tree cut down and took possession of the packet. As it fell, little grains of ferment were scattered over the vegetables growing all round and that is why we have plants which produce fermentation.

"Elonggi transmitted the ferment to the whole human race and since that time men have made beer and rice spirit to enliven their celebrations.

"In course of time other fermented liquors were made with millet, corn, nuts, Job's tears and certain roots and fruits . . ."

It was Mikat who sang for us the fine lyrical poem about the seasons.[1] Its verses record what happened at different periods of the Garo year when the rays are being cultivated.

Here are two more legends, as related by Mikat Sangma:

THE ORIGIN OF NIGHTMARES

"From the instrument used to sever the navel string of Mother Earth when she was born there emerged the soporific herb muni, with long stalks and crimson leaves.

"One day a man called Nibajipa went to market to buy rings and bright ornaments for his daughters Aje and Tira.

"While on his way he tripped over a muni stalk and fell down. He wondered what strange plant it could be and asked Salgra what use he could make of it. Salgra replied: 'It gives my body deep sleep at any hour of the day or night when I feel the need to forget. Put it under the steps of the house in the case of youths and under the rice mortar in the case of girls. They will feel a weight on the breast and their power to move and talk during sleep will be increased. Men will call this weight the *weight of the phantom*. It will remain on their lips for ever.'

"Nibajipa carried out Salgra's instructions. Ever since then men use muni when they want to play tricks on each other. . . .

"As Salgra said, they put what is called nightmare into men's heads."

[1] In Garo: *jabylsirangeo salyng ryngani.*

THE STAIRCASE TO THE MOON

"In the good old days a man lived with his wife and a fine baby. He loved them more than anything in the world and always did his best to please them.

"One evening when he was sitting with them on the veranda of his house the moon appeared in all its splendour high in a sky sparkling with stars.

"The child's eyes were wide with wonder as it gazed at the moon for a long time and then said: 'Oh what a beautiful moon. How I would like to have it in my hands and play with it! Father, go and get it for me!'

"The father explained that the moon was very far away and there was no solid road to it, but the child was not to be appeased and refused to eat or drink. In fact it became so fractious that the brainless little wife could not endure its perpetual crying and rounded on her husband: 'Do you want the child to go on crying for ever? If you'd really tried you'd have got him what he wants. Why not make a staircase to the moon and bring it within reach once and for all?'

"There was no satisfying her and she simply derided her husband's explanation.

"Then the man decided to build a staircase to reach the moon. He searched the forest for all the timber and bamboo he required and asked his maternal nephew to help him. The nephew had to fetch the wood while the man carried on with the actual building.

"When the staircase was well above the clouds the father thought he was near the moon and called out: 'Bring me some more wood! Bring more bamboo!'

"But the wife and her nephew below did not hear distinctly and thought he had said: 'I've got the moon, knock down the staircase!'

"The nephew immediately took an axe and knocked away the main supports of the enormous structure which collapsed with a terrible noise and the man was hurled to a great distance and killed.

"Not being able to find the body, the woman and her nephew waited for days and days, believing that he would turn up with the moon in his hands. But the moon stayed high in the sky. So high and so long that at length they thought he had decided to remain with her.

"The mass of débris which was all that remained of the staircase has become the Rangira chain in the south-eastern part of Atchik-Asong."

To add to the excitement of our evenings with Mikat Sangma my friend Naz was missing one morning when we were back at camp. He and Narong had gone off hunting at dawn the previous day and had not returned at night, a most unusual occurrence. B.B. Marak tried in vain to entertain me with two young gibbons he had got from the village, but I was very uneasy and had sat up waiting for the return of our party. Bokseng was stretched out on a camp bed playing his bamboo guitar by striking the two cords with a little stick—the only way in which this child of the jungle could give vent to his artistic feelings. The whole village was asleep. It was after midnight and only subdued sounds reached our ears. My Garo friends were seeking oblivion while I could not even think of sleep. As for Peter, he did not venture to look me in the face.

We had decided to strike camp next morning and here was an unexpected hold-up. The mahouts seemed uneasy and went off to look for something at the edge of the jungle. They had had as bad a night as I myself and I had heard them talking in low tones behind the leafy wall of their improvised hut and going out in turn to put a log on the fire, which immediately blazed up, crackled and then died down. I also heard the sound of animals stamping about not far from our tent—boars, no doubt. Ants were busy beneath our feet and their continuous comings and goings sounded like running water.

At dawn we discovered the tracks of a tiger quite close to the camp. Something, Marak's two gibbons perhaps, must have attracted him. The mahouts must have had a shrewd idea when they kept the fire up so assiduously. These men of the forest have no other defence.

After the blank night, a second day followed without any news of Naz and his companion. B.B. Marak became jocular:

"He's been kidnapped by one of the women who's taken a fancy to him!"

It was not impossible. Bokseng went off with an escort to look for our strays.

Such misadventures, tragic enough at the time, usually seem comic when viewed in retrospect! I was positively distracted when, about five in the evening, I heard shouts from the village children. I shot out of the tent and saw Naz and Narong, accompanied by Bokseng and his men, carrying a long bamboo pole with a fine tiger hanging from it. Our mighty hunters were determined to achieve their ambition and had succeeded. Naz was naturally delighted and quite astounded that I had been so worried.

With one more night remaining before we were to leave Rangiragiri, my colleague, after a meal of dried buffalo, all the food we had left, said to me:

"Let's go for a walk in the forest!"

I wondered what was in his mind.

"This is the idea," he continued. "So far, all the Garos have refused to carve us a kima, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"And you're anxious to get one for the collections of the *Musée de l'Homme*?"

"Certainly, but it seems a difficult proposition!"

"Not at all, I've found a deserted village where there are plenty of kimas. We'll help ourselves to a few."

"But how can we go without taking one of our men? Even Marak will stop us!"

"We'll start when they're all asleep!"

I agreed, not without misgiving, and late at night we crept out of the camp and made our way by paths which were avenues of glow worms to the deserted village a very considerable distance away. Under the wide subtropical sky, which mysteriously appeared to reflect the lights of some ghost city below, we entered the clearing in the middle of the famous village. It must have been abandoned two or three years ago, but the kimas were there near the remains of the houses. Jean—an odd disinterrer of spirits—got to work with a pick. His every movement made me shiver and the mattock seemed to resound like clanging bronze. In the distance we heard the despairing howl of a wild dog, that warning cry of leaders of packs of red dogs, which are famous for their ferocity. What would be our fate if we were seen? Is it not always dangerous to disturb the souls of the dead? My close contact with primitive people had made me superstitious, and in contrast to Jean's nonchalance I felt horribly guilty and prayed to all the local genii to make sure that the souls had long since deserted these pieces of wood and were now happily reincarnated somewhere in pleasant villages on sunny hillsides!

But I also reflected that these kimas might well be appreciated in Paris less than they deserved to be or might crumble into dust in my packing cases on the long voyage home! Why go to so much trouble, with the unhappy prospect of being killed on the spot if we were caught?

"Take the pick. I've dug out three. Let's go," Jean called out.

We hurried back at top speed. The wild dogs seemed quite

close now and every moment I was expecting to see their big yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness. They are very dangerous creatures and sometimes get into such a fury that they do not know whether to bolt or attack anyone who disturbs them.

Suddenly I heard a stifled groan, followed by others more distinct. Naz was writhing like one possessed. He had thrown down his trophies and was undressing, swearing volubly. Horror of horrors! The burial monuments were infested by red ants which had transferred their attentions to my friend! He had discarded all his clothes which were full of these pests. They have an infernal bite!

"It will take more than this to make me give it up!" he yelled.

He began to beat the kimas on the ground as hard as he could to shake off the ants, and this made a frightful noise which went echoing away into the distance, well beyond the village.

I took off the raincoat I was wearing as a protection against the damp night air and threw it over his shoulders.

"Go ahead," he said, "I can manage by myself . . ."

It was good advice, as I could allay the fears of our friends who would have discovered our absence and be worrying and starting to look for us. I ran to the village, fearing to find the whole place on a war footing, but when I arrived all was calm and I was able to sleep for a few hours and greet the new day with a sigh of relief.

The hour of farewell had sounded and we must leave our friends, Bokseng, Mikat, the leper revolutionary and his legends, with a feeling that we had not completed our task among these little people, so stubbornly faithful to their race and traditions. The brisk, fresh dry-season wind, sweeping over the hills from which we descended to our main camp at Allagiri, brought us the villagers' last farewell: *Anga goal nabé!* (Don't forget us).

To see the Garos in their proper context it seemed to us indispensable to get in touch with the other mountain tribes of the central *massif* and in the weeks following we visited the Ganchings, experts in carving nokpanthés, the Atongs of Baghmara, the Duals and the Chisaks who inhabit the jungles of Rongrengiri.

We left our truck at Tura and in five weeks covered on foot the tracks leading to the frontier of the Khasi Hills, passing through Rongram, Megagiri and Rongrengiri. These tracks are rarely used and swarm with wild animals, not excluding ele-

phants. It was a particularly exciting trip and our health suffered a good deal.

At Rongrengiri a jeep belonging to the Garo Hills Forestry Department took us to Goalpara where Peter was waiting for us with the truck.

Three months' sojourn in these unhealthy but enchanted hills had left us with but one wish—to return,[1] but we had to adhere to our dry season programme which provided for a visit to the Khasi tribes and other tribes dwelling in the Himalayan foothills on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. And so to the next stage of our expedition.

[1] In the winter of 1954-1955 the expedition spent a further three months in the Garo Hills.

PART III

IN THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SERPENT GOD

"Oh you who throng the roads of the earth, pilgrims, travellers, merchants, dare any of you say that a scene has ever brought tears to your eyes . . . !"

I

January 1954.

AFTER the heat of the fever-stricken Garo Hills it became cold as we ascended Nongpoh. An icy wind swept these hills, which are dramatic even though bare of trees. Out of a thousand photographs of India I should easily pick out the eroded and irregular peaks of the fantastic landscape of Shillong; the unique prospect of range upon range of mountains intersected by deep ravines is quite sufficient distinction. In places the folds of the hills disclose woods gay with giant rhododendrons and forests of pine, oak, birch and walnut which have been saved from the universal devastation by the survival of reverence for the divinity of the soil. They are the sacred groves of the Khasis which still guard the wonderful secrets of the clans.

Some progress has been made with afforestation but it will be long before the mountain recovers from the desecration it has suffered for centuries and resumes that mantle of trees which enabled it to retain its soil. Every year in the rainy season the latter is swept down into the valleys, producing real havoc. The deforestation is due to the fact that for centuries the Khasis have required firewood for smelting the iron ore existing everywhere under their land.

Their wild neighbours, the Garo and Naga "head hunters", (a reputation richly deserved) had a wholesome fear of them and referred to them in their legends as "those who live up above and draw fire from heaven to make iron".

Perhaps they had other reasons for fearing the Khasis, who were slave hunters and had no qualms about raiding the jungle villages. Slaves kept the fires going and hauled the monstrous funerary monoliths which are—and always will be—such a

striking feature of the Khasi landscape. Slaves came to be an integral part of the tribe, following it in all its wanderings until delivered up to the "Serpent God", in accordance with the rites fanatically practised in these desolate solitudes. The Serpent God demanded human sacrifices as something necessary for the welfare of the community, and his requirements are regarded as a sufficient excuse for the retention of a rite known as the *U Thlen*, which also involves human sacrifice and is practised to this day.

I hasten to add that an impartial judgement on such matters is impossible to a white man! To what gods did we sacrifice the thousands of victims slain by thousands of bombs in the course of the recent war?

Our arrival at Shillong, the capital of Assam, was dusty and uninspiring. The town is a typical oriental bazaar, a hubbub of voices in the midst of which one rubs shoulders with the travellers and traders of all the adjacent races, Bengalis, Assamese, Nepalese. There is nothing attractive about the place except its beautiful situation.

We picked out the Khasis among the crowds.

"But they're Chinese!" exclaimed Naz, who has spent a good part of his life among the Thaï.

The colour of the Khasis, who are very closely related to the southern Chinese, short and stocky and with the well-nourished look of mountaineers living on good soil in a healthy climate, is in fact a pale, unalloyed yellow, especially in the case of the women. Those we have met here are dressed in the near-European fashion adopted by most of the tribes. The men wear a big patriarchal turban and the women are swathed from head to foot in the voluminous cloaks which the Gallic missionaries, the first Europeans to establish themselves in these mountains, made their ancestresses wear over the traditional dress which showed too much shoulder.

Except for the long main street, which is mainly commercial, Shillong is nothing but a series of switchbacks, being built on some dozen hills separated by ravines. But the residential quarter, which is also the administrative centre, gives one quite a shock with its luxurious government buildings and villas set among municipal parks abounding with superb trees—oaks and innumerable pines.

Shillong was chosen as governor's residence and headquarters of the Assam garrison on account of its healthy climate, altitude (4,900 ft.) and unique position, being sheltered by a majestic peak which is the highest of the central chain.

But here, realizing that I was not a tourist on the loose, I had preoccupations other than indulging my fancies. We had returned to civilization and the rules and regulations it involves. Official visits must be paid.

We went to the rest-house, reserved for officials, where I found a letter from Dr. B. S. Guha instructing me to get in touch with the Chief Secretary of Assam, S. K. Datta, and let him know my plans. B. S. Guha seemed to have no misgivings about the extension of our visas, so our first step was to call on S. K. Datta and Governor Daulatram, once an important Sind carpet merchant and now a post-Partition refugee from Pakistan and brother-in-arms of Pandit Nehru.

S. K. Datta is a charming person, a product of Santinikethan University,[1] and his is the responsible job of representing the Central Government of New Delhi throughout the territories. As I myself had been sent by the Central Government, he was my immediate superior here. Thanks to him, residence permits were immediately issued and we have been given a further six months—which will take us to June.

When the Chief Secretary handed back my papers he said playfully:

"Don't exceed your time, or you'll risk being cut off by floods. Every year the Siliguri road, the only means of access to Assam, is under water from July to November."

I replied in kind:

"I know a fairyland in Goalpara district where I have a hide-out if the roads are closed."

"Where?" he asked, his curiosity aroused.

"With the Barua, the Rajah of Gauripur."

"You couldn't have a better," he replied, warmly shaking hands. "But don't forget to let me know your movements so that I can notify the local police."

In Shillong lives a very interesting character, the well-known anthropologist and folklorist, Dr. Verrier Elwin, "Anthropological Adviser" of the Assam Government for the N.E.F.A. territories. This savant has spent thirty years among the primitive tribes of central India, a qualification which makes him an unchallenged authority, more particularly on the psychological approach to such awkward customers as these particular groups. It is his special function to train the young political officers who are the pick of the army before they take up their

[1] Founded in Bengal thirty-four years ago by Rabindranath Tagore. It is the first open international university of India, and of world-wide renown.

posts in the dangerous mountain areas where unrest is chronic. The training is not merely on the administrative side but also designed to equip them for ethnological study.

Verrier Elwin lacks neither judgement nor knowledge, but I did not anticipate his objections, which to some extent thwarted my work and plans.

"All the districts are in turmoil," he said. "It will be impossible for you to visit the eastern region. The Naga tribes are in revolt and a detachment of a hundred and sixty Indian troops has been wiped out on the Burmese frontier. It was the advance guard for four officials trying to get in touch with the Konyak Naga villages. For your own safety the Shillong authorities cannot issue you a permit for that area."

A Naga autonomy movement was set on foot after Indian independence became a fact and it tends to elude the control of New Delhi. The Indian Government is trying to remedy the situation otherwise than by police measures and armed force, but despite all its efforts the present position is very difficult. Hundreds of people are regularly being killed along these frontiers where questions of national interest are the only issue. The splendid Naga jungles are rich in natural wealth—gold, copper, coal and oil. The hot and sustained press controversy about the so-called Christian missionaries who have been exposed by the natives themselves reveals the ambiguous pretexts put forward to camouflage foreign political or economic infiltration.

So I have no hope whatever of paying a visit to the Nagas, which would have been the objective of our third itinerary.

At Shillong there is a branch of the Indian Museum at Calcutta, the "Anthropological Survey of India", which is Mukherjee's headquarters. The director, a Bengali who has a degree in anthropology, is arranging a three months' programme for our studies in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Apart from official visits, we have been employing our time at Shillong in organizing our expedition into the mountains. It calls for equipment in perfect working order and warm clothes, and we have been buying pullovers and petrol or paraffin stoves, as our destination is described as a lonely, treeless plateau. We shall need many things which can be dispensed with in the forest areas.

We shall have three main centres from which our excursions will radiate—Mawphlang, 2,000 metres up, Cherrapunji on the Pakistan frontier and Jowaï in the Jaintia country where the Pnars live. From these points, reached by mountain trails,

we shall have to do our climbing and descending on foot. No pack animals are available, but we are told that we shall get all the porters we want locally.

Our interpreter is Paulus, a Khasi Christian obtained for us by a French de Sales missionary who is a teacher at the Don Bosco College at Shillong.

This Father has been living in the Khasi Hills for six months. He is a man of deep religious feelings and I am afraid that some of the things I have said have shocked him. As an ethnologist I regret any interference with the ancient customs of the few untouched races still left on earth. I am also convinced that our religion can bring them nothing from the spiritual angle, as they are quite incapable, psychically speaking, of grasping the abstractions with which the faith of the West is overloaded. Most of the native converts to Christianity whom I have studied are interested solely in external manifestations which have no influence whatever on the great world of their spirits and gods, the mainstay of their traditions and essential organization.

Among the Khasis this question is even more serious. In the mountains, in contrast to the other tribes of Assam, there is a majority of "advanced" tribes, among whom are many Christians, all the Shillong schools where they were taught having been started during the British occupation. The Christians, deemed spiritually superior to the Hindus by virtue of their political rôle during the white colonization, are too apt to think that baptism by itself confers all the knowledge and development needed. I have often heard natives educated at these schools speak of the Hindu religion with horror, obviously regarding it as nothing but corruption and the work of the devil. This attitude, inspired by unjustified racial pride, is incompatible both with the scientific spirit and Christianity itself. The levelling influence of these missions, which began their work at Shillong more than fifty years ago, has not only promoted numerous signs of decadence in the local traditions and civilization of the Khasis but also seriously poisoned relations between the hill folk and the men of the plain.

These relations have never been easy. The Khasi leaders of the independence movement for a new state comprising all the tribal regions in the Hills demand that Shillong, in the very heart of Khasi country, shall be its capital—which seems very reasonable.

"What are these Indians of the plain doing here?" they say, all the more emphatically because the Assamese of the Brahmaputra valley have a majority in the Assam assembly. "They

should let us manage our own affairs about which they know nothing, and go home to *sweat* in their miserable lowlands."

The breeze of revolt is blowing in the hills!

The itinerary on which we are launching is said to be one of the most unusual in the whole country. It will prove to be most exciting and introduce us to new regions which are in the highest degree self-contained and untouched by the world and the homes of tribes which are virtually independent of the central authority, governed solely by their own customs and speak one and the same language—the Khasi tongue, headache of the professional linguists.

The Khasis call themselves "a tribe of independent Tartars", brothers of the southern Chinese and the Thaï, so close to them at the junction of the far-eastern and Hindu worlds. They have preserved all their original traditions and myths and throughout the centuries their basic civilization has remained utterly untouched by Indian influences. Today the Khasi Hills, a feudal state, has been divided into a number of territories ruled by *siem*, a sort of minor hereditary kings who have political connections *inter se* and whose relations with the Central Government of India are governed by a treaty giving them almost complete autonomy in local administration.

This big district,[1] on what geographers call the Shillong plateau, is divided into two parts, Khasi Hills, inhabited by the Khasis, and Jaintia Hills, by the Syntengs or Pnars, races belonging to the same group. This ethnical unit, held together not only by race and language but also by a mythological religion old as time, is estimated to number nearly 200,000 souls.

I suspect that they are the "barbarians" referred to in Chinese texts towards the end of the feudal period in the third century A.D. and that they left China for the south, probably under Chinese pressure. There is the case of the Miaos, for example. The contrast between the order of the words in a certain Miao expression for parents (na-tsi=mother-father) and that of the equivalent Chinese expression (fu-mu=father-mother) seems to point to a matriarchal organization. One can even recognize in primitive China traces of a matriarchate in the plebs in contrast to the patriarchal organization of the patrician class—which could suggest different ethnical origins for the two classes.

I have been equally struck by the similarity between certain Khasi and Miao words and certain Vietnamese words: "bird"

[1] Between lat. 25°7′ and 26°5′ north and between long. 91°47′ and 92°52′ east.

for instance is *sim* in Khasi, *chim* (pronounced tyim) in Vietnamese; "bone" is *shing* in Khasi and *xuong* (pronounced suong) in Vietnamese; "to cut" is *pom* in Khasi and *bam* in Vietnamese.

The complex of any nation's customs is always marked by a distinctive pattern of the highest interest, which hard, patient work can ultimately unravel. But how difficult it is for the foreigner to get into the real minds of those obsessed by phantasms of a universe we can never penetrate!

I admit that I was quite at sea and infinitely disheartened during my first few weeks among the Khasis. Leaving the hot, sunny jungles behind me I found myself suddenly transported to a desolate, icy plateau inhabited by disconcerting beings. There seemed no point of contact and for a long time our relations were hopelessly strained.

The Khasis are organized in tribes and exogamous clans, themselves subdivided into castes. At the top of the social ladder are the heads of state, nobles and priests. Next come the rich farmers and merchants, the soldiers and the common people. The slaves, who are in a minority, are decently treated and incorporated in the clans to which they belong like members of the same family.

We shall meet with several groups, roughly divided as follows: the Khasis proper, i.e. those inhabiting the villages of the great clans of Shillong, Cherrapunji and Mawphlang, and the Pnars of Jowaï and Nartiang, each of them living in a particular region of these vast territories. All these groups are subdivided into clans and claim descent from a common ancestor, Ka Iaw Bei, "the first grandmother". Her brother, U Suid Nia, "the first maternal great-uncle" is, as we shall see, more highly esteemed than U Thaw Lang,[1] "the first grandfather". The name of this ancestress has been kept up and is particularly honoured in a certain cult peculiar to the Khasis.

Before visiting Khasi villages it is essential to have some idea of their religion and beliefs. So I have spent some time at Shillong rummaging in the Governor of Assam's library for all the reports furnished by various officers in the last fifty years about all these tribes which have managed to avoid contact with the whites.

U Blei Nong Thaw is the Khasi god of creation who, under matriarchal influence, has usually become Ka Blei Synshar, a female divinity. Neither of them is the supreme deity. The basis of the Khasi religion is animism, a belief in spirits which

[1] *U*, the masculine, *Ka* the feminine article. The feminine plural, *Ki*, is also used for the masculine plural.

in form is close to the Garo religion, although their pantheon is totally different. But the outstanding feature which distinguishes the Khasis from the tribes of north-eastern India is ancestor-worship, the predominating element in their faith. The ceremonies are in the hands of the priests (*lyngdoh*) and the old men versed in the art of necromancy. The Khasis have only a very vague idea of any next world. They believe in a future state, a sort of kingdom where they will all meet again in the company of their ancestors and will have all the areca nuts and betel they want without the trouble of growing them (hence the expression "he-who-chews-betel-with-the-gods" for the dead), the Khasi idea of supreme bliss being to pass the time by the fireside chewing betel and chatting with family and friends. The betel quids are dearly loved by all Asiatic peoples. They are made with a piece of areca nut and a pinch of chalk rolled in a betel leaf.

The Khasi gods are never represented physically but worshipped as spirits. There are the gods of the state, of wealth and of water, and also the tutelary god of the village to whom sacrifice is offered every year, or whenever thought necessary. Speaking generally, this animist religion can be defined as a means of averting disaster or gaining the goodwill of a spirit who dispenses good or evil fortune by offering sacrifices in his honour. There is a female demon called Ka Tarok which is said to be responsible for delirium in fevers. It usually lives on the lower slopes of hills but sometimes climbs them and makes havoc all round—an obvious reference to the prevalence of malaria in jungles and certain marshy areas in the mountains. In some of the villages we have been present at the "Ceremony of the broken egg"[1] which reveals Ka Tarok's hiding-place.

In the Jaintia Hills there is a much-venerated "goddess of smallpox". The marks left by this disease are called "kisses of the goddess" and the sufferers are considered sacred. If there are several victims in the same house it becomes the "house of the goddess". A pail of water is placed on the doorstep so that any who enter may wash their feet as a sign of respect. I have seen women washing their heads with water previously used by the sufferer in the hope of being touched by the divine power of the goddess. In practice this means catching the disease themselves! Children march in procession into the houses of smallpox victims with no other idea than to receive "the kiss".

The Khasis worship the spirits of waterfalls. Every year there are great festivities in the main fishing season. The siem sacri-

[1] I shall have more to say about this later.

fice goats to the goddess of the river, Ka Blei sam um.[1] In olden days she took the form of a crocodile to which a goat must be sacrificed several times a year. The whole village took to little boats and accompanied the priests to the middle of the river where an altar was set up and the goat decapitated with a single blow of a sword. As soon as the head fell the spectators crowded round to see which way it was facing. If north or west it was a bad sign; if south or east all the auguries were favourable. The assembly then joined in a hymn called the *Kynhoï* after which the siem gave the signal to disperse. Even today several rivers are worshipped by the Khasis. Shillong Mountain itself is a vague but benevolent god, discovered by a man named U Shillong who gave his name first to the peak and then to the town. The siem of Mylliem and Nongkrem, two villages not far away, have great veneration for this deity to whom their clan seem to belong.

According to the legends the Khasi priests are all descended from gods. The words *lyngdoh* or *langdoh*[2] distinguish a noble caste which at all times has enjoyed the privilege of selecting the flesh of animals for sacrifices. Lyngdoh is also the name of the richest and most important Khasi clan. In principle anyone of that name is a hereditary priest.

These priests conduct all state ceremonies. Each state has several lyngdohs and in some of them the lyngdoh is also king of the country and therefore a siem.

Side by side with the lyngdoh there are *soh-klei* who may perform the office of priests. In some places the Khasis have many family ceremonies, some of which are secret, in their own homes. No stranger is allowed to be present. During our visit we were invited to only one funeral ceremony and my information about other religious rites is necessarily secondhand.

The rites are performed by the senior maternal uncle, the *uk-ni*, who must not be confused with the *uk-pah*, the paternal uncle. The former alone is the proper guardian of the property of the house and the clan.

Like the gods, sacrificial routines vary greatly in different regions, but the presence of the priestess called *ka lyngdoh* is common to all of them. She must belong to a noble caste and help the lyngdoh in all religious sacrifices.

In Nongkrem there is a high priestess who has temporal power and presides over the enthronement of the siem and lyngdoh of that state. All these priests and priestesses are, of course, appointed for life. When they die there are elaborate

[1] *Um* = water and river.

[2] *Lang* = assembly; *doh* = flesh or meat (i.e. sacrifice).

obsequies and their successors are enthroned with certain specific rites.

In the states of Nongkrem and Shillong, when the corpse of a lyngdoh has been burnt his successor must carry out a long series of ablutions and then ascend Shillong mountain, accompanied by the men of his clan, dancing all the way up and carrying their swords and shields as well as a sort of fly-swish made of goat hairs. They also carry a quiver full of arrows on their backs and wear white cock feathers in their turbans. The dancers step forwards and backwards, face each other and from time to time cross swords as if they were actually fighting. The object of this performance is to frighten away evil spirits and clear the atmosphere of the harmful vapours which could affect the health of the ancient clan which has elected the new lyngdoh. The fly-swishes clear the track of baneful influences ahead of the new priest toiling up the steep slopes, the haunt of many demons who have made the remote mountainside their home.

When the summit is reached the Khasis collect the leaves of a tree, called *Ka'la phiah* in their language, which I have not been able to identify. They strew a thickish layer of these leaves on the ground, above which a cock and a goat must be sacrificed by the new lyngdoh in person. Nine separate parts of the bodies are offered to the god of Shillong mountain, the famous U Blei Shillong. The lyngdoh takes the usual oaths and the ceremony comes to an end. The ritual dancing is repeated on the return.

The priests have great influence over the superstitious minds of the Khasis and usually take advantage of it to demand presents of corn, cattle and also money. But are they alone in this?

I tried hard to discover any legend about the birth of the Khasi race, but unfortunately have only been able to collect legends about the origin of the gods of the mountains and rivers and that of the great clans.

The Reverend Dr. Roberts, of the Welsh Mission at Cherrapunji, has collected several which will be found in this book and I have picked up others in the villages I visited.

The cascade of Noh Ka Likai, near Shillong, is a superb waterfall at the height of the rainy season. Seen from the Laitkynsew heights, it is a magnificent spectacle, the torrent emerging from dense jungle and falling five hundred metres perpendicularly—a silver ribbon which is very conspicuous against the red granite of the cliff. A great place of pilgrimage for the Khasis, it is near the village of Nongriat, which is

reached from the hamlet of Tyrnaw by a series of big stone steps erected for the purpose many years ago.

THE LEGEND OF NOH KA LIKAI WATERFALL

Once upon a time there lived in a village a married woman called Ka Likaï. She was very poor though her husband worked hard. She gave birth to a child and then her husband died.

While the baby was still tiny she had a great deal of trouble to bring him up but when he could walk he was so beautiful that he was the joy of her life.

She married again but unfortunately her husband did not love the child at all and was jealous of his beauty and intelligence. He often reproached his wife for paying too much attention to the little one and not enough to himself.

One day when she was away from home carrying iron ore the father-in-law killed the child and cut him up in pieces which he cooked in a curry. He put the cooking pot in a place where his wife usually ate her meal when she returned from work. Then he got rid of the bones and head but forgot the fingers which he had put in the betel basket.

When the mother returned from work she immediately asked where her child was. He was usually playing round the house and ran to her the moment he caught sight of her.

"He was here just now; he can't be far away," replied the husband.

The wife ate her curry and, thinking it tasted particularly good, assumed that a friend had sacrificed a pig and given her husband part of it, as is the Khasi custom. When she had eaten her fill she felt like chewing a little betel. Horror of horrors! She found the child's fingers.

She immediately realized what had happened and, mad with grief, ran out to throw herself over the precipice before anyone could stop her. The tears she shed became the source of the river which feeds the falls, called Noh Ka Likaï after her. The poor mother's cries can be heard at the bottom of the pool below the falls.

The following legend about the sun and moon has reference to the death penalty for incest, which is the law among the Khasis as among the Garos.

WHY THERE ARE SPOTS ON THE MOON

In days of old a woman had four children—Ka Sngi, the sun,

Ka Um, water, Ka Ding, fire, and U Bymaï,[1] the moon. Thus there were three girls and one boy.

U Bymaï was very wicked and began to make love to his sister, Ka Sngi. In those times the moon shone as brightly as the sun. So when Ka Sngi realized her brother's evil intentions she was very angry. Snatching a handful of cinders from her mother's fire, she said to U Bymaï:

"Thy depraved, incestuous desires shame me. How canst thou behave in such a way to me, thy eldest sister, who hath cared for thee so long? I, Ka Sngi, who have held thee in my arms and carried thee on my back like a mother? I will smear thy face with ashes and order thee to leave the house."

Then U Bymaï was overcome with shame and turned pale with grief. Since that day the moon's light is feeble and the spots you see when it is full are the remains of the ashes which the sun rubbed on its face.

So the greatest insult a Khasi can think of is to say: "Cover your face with ashes and keep out of my way!"

The day we left Shillong it was as cold as ice. Peter, who had proved himself a faithful friend and earned our affection, had left us. His health had deteriorated of late and the harsh climate of the mountains would have been bad for him. Mukherjee himself had all he could do to hold his own against the cold, as the temperature was lower than on the coldest day in Calcutta, and he frankly confessed that he would be very glad to see sunny, mild Bengal again.

The tarmac highway ended as soon as we left the town and climbed up Nongthymaï and we had a very bad road to Mawphlang. The uplands of the Khasi Hills are all alike, disconcertingly monotonous plateaux intersected by deep and narrow gullies, made by mountain torrents, from which rise white and pink vapours masking the country beyond like an ethereal curtain. But the monotony is not incompatible with grandeur.

When the fork of the road from Cherrapungi to Mawphlang has been left behind the landscape changes. The forest suddenly disappears and cultivated fields take its place. We came across monoliths, the Khasis' memorial stones, menhirs and dolmens such as can be found in western Europe, northern Africa and western Asia. Like these, they are doubtless the emblem of that phallic cult of "standing stones" which was so widespread in

[1] Note that the moon is masculine, as among the Annamites and the Thaïs. This is unusual among primitive peoples.

ancient times. These monoliths, in the shape of *linga*, are also met with in India where they are associated with the worship of Siva. There are huge specimens in the temple of Tandjore, for instance.

But our new friend Paulus assured us that we were utterly wrong. "Round here they are called *kynmaw*, 'memorials'. They are neither graves nor burial monuments but cenotaphs."

He went on to tell us that these stones may be anything between three and fifteen feet in height and two and a half feet thick. They are generally found in groups of three or five, or perhaps seven or nine—always an uneven number. The ones we saw by the roadside were roughly carved and rounded off at the top. The largest stone is in the middle, the dolmen always being placed opposite the central menhir. We saw one in the distance, crowning a dominating hill. I have noticed that they are laid out haphazard, without reference to the cardinal points.

There are two kinds of memorial stones, the *mawnam* and the *maw-bynna*. Of the first variety, which are dressed stones, the tallest commemorates the male ancestor while the smaller stones on each side commemorate the brothers and nephews of that ancestor. The flat stones are dedicated to the first ancestress and all the women on whom falls the burden of performing the duties assigned to the head of the clan. They need a rest after their labours and there they lie, watched over by the men, the standing stones. Yet these monuments are still shrouded in mystery. It is for the savants to solve it.

Silhouetted against the skyline on bare ground, they produce a curious effect. A strong wind, coming from the east like a prophetic harbinger of divine fury, made me shiver and I was glad to see the first houses of Mawphlang.

It is a sprawling town and reminded me of a section of Clignancourt with its corrugated iron roofs! It was horribly cold. As the rest-house, with its excessively large rooms, seemed uninviting we decided that we should be warmer in our own tent and set it up in the very middle of a sort of kynmaw cemetery which offered some shelter from the wind. Rolling up our sleeves—as hard physical work made us warm—we got our camp ready and Mukherjee, swathed up to his nose in a scarf and hands in pockets, could not keep his teeth from chattering. Peter was no longer there to do the cooking and I had to turn to. Paulus began to peel the vegetables and then suddenly disappeared. After half an hour he returned, accompanied by the Reverend John, of the Welsh Mission, who was carrying an enormous bowl of beef stew. What a windfall! The missionary gave us a

lot of information about the country. The villages, especially those which are not Christian, are very far apart. He gave us some useful tips, in particular that the siem of Mawphlang, the head of the state, must be notified at once of our arrival. I sent a message by Paulus and asked for a meeting next day. We passed that first evening at the house of a former officer in the British army in Assam, Captain Hunt, who had taken to farming and distilling in the wild, remote Khasi mountains.

He received us in a little bar, which performs the functions of a shop by day and becomes a general dining-room at night. It was all like a Far-West film, with the captain for hero. The firelight played on the steel barrels of the rifles hanging on the wall. Photos of groups of officers, regimental relics, strewed the overmantel. Hunt, a six-footer of ruddy complexion, has lived in Assam for twenty-five years. He married a Khasi woman, a daughter of the siem of Mawphlang, and their fifteen-year-old daughter, a tall, pretty girl, has of course, taken her mother's name, in accordance with the strict matriarchal system. There is an absolute prohibition on a man marrying a woman of his own clan and in some cases marriages between certain clans are forbidden because the young people of marriageable age are of the same stock.

But that is not all. I am told that many Khasi women want to have children by European men because they can thus make sure that there can be no relationship between them and the clan. With that object in view they go off to work in the tea gardens in the Himalayan foothills where there are plenty of English bachelors who are attracted by their youth and graceful carriage. When pregnancy follows the women return to their mountains, proud to bear fine children with fair skins.

We heard that a rumour was already circulating in the village to the effect that we were members of a mission sent out by the Indian Government. No doubt the crimson sash of the Calcutta Anthropological Service which Haricharan always wears has had its effect. Whatever the reason, we have not made a good impression. I explained to the captain that we were ethnologists visiting the Khasi to collect information about their customs and he had no further doubts about the success of our expedition.

"An Indian Government mission would not be exactly welcome at this moment," he said.

"But why?"

"It's being said round here that the new régime wants to undermine the matriarchal system which is the foundation of

the whole social architecture of the clans, and it would be a very grave political error."

The Khasis know perfectly well that their matrilinear organization has served their race and to destroy it would inevitably diminish its vitality. In the family the mother holds the first place. On her death, her eldest brother, and failing him a younger, takes her place. If there is no brother, a woman from the family of the mother's sister assumes the rôle. As a general rule, the eldest brother of the mother performs the function of representing the clan and helps the feminine head of the clan. He is always consulted about everything. The feminine duties and burdens pass, like the property, to the youngest daughter, who thus has little chance of marrying young. The girls choose their husbands. Captain Hunt's was a marriage of this sort and he gave me an entertaining account of the ceremony.

"On the great day I went with my friends to the house of my future wife. I had nothing with me but a pannikin full of betel nut and spirit. When we were half way there we were stopped and told to wait, as the girl was on her way to meet us, escorted by the men of her family. When she arrived the head of her house offered me and my friends a betel nut and some spirit. I had to reciprocate. Then both parties poured spirit into a bowl from which we all drank and there was great rejoicing . . .'

"That was soon over!" interrupted Naz.

"Not at all; there was more to come! All the guests and relations returned to the girl's house where her other relations were waiting for us in the porch. They took me by the hand and delivered a little speech, something on these lines: 'You are going to be our brother; you must be kind and take great care of your wife and obey her in everything and follow her everywhere . . .' In a word, the exact opposite of what we are used to! I was permitted for the first time to sit next to my fiancée though I had known her over a year and asked her to marry me long before. Custom then requires that the man should present his bag of betel to the lady who is to become his wife. She offers some to all the guests in turn while the ritual formula is being put to the two contracting parties. They reply and that's the end."

Apart from that ceremony, there is a very special function at every wedding. The newly-weds select two advocates, one male and one female, who pretend to quarrel, the idea being to show up the absurd side of family bickering, prevent disputes and chase away evil spirits.

Khasi weddings are, of course, accompanied by religious ceremonies. After his jibes at the somewhat rudimentary

customs marking the civil contract, the captain described them to us.

The god of the State and the two ancestors of the clan, Ka Iaw Bei ("the first grandmother") and U Suid Nia ("the first maternal great-uncle") are first invoked.

There are three kinds of marriages; the *pynhiar synjat*, the *lamdoh* and the *iadih kiad*. The two first are the marriages of the aristocratic and the rich, while the *iadih kiad* is for slaves and people too poor to afford the expense of the others. The young man and the girl each buy a ring called *ka-synjat* (from which the *pynhiar synjat* ceremony takes its name) while in the *lamdoh* marriage rings are not exchanged.

Paulus gave us a version which is more orthodox than the captain's. A young man proposing to marry a girl first mentions the matter to his parents, unless the latter have already decided on a daughter-in-law. They send a male representative of the family, often the maternal uncle, to treat with the girl's parents. When the wishes of the fiancée have been ascertained and the marriage terms settled there is an inquiry to find out whether there is any impediment to the union. Both parties consult the priests who resort to the methods of divination current among the Khasis, i.e. the egg-breaking and the inspection of the entrails of a cock. If the auspices are favourable the date of the marriage is fixed and the young people exchange silver rings.

As described by the captain, the young man leaves his house with his escort. He wears a red or white turban and goes to the girl's house where a feast has been prepared. There he finds the whole family assembled, decked out in all their finery and with all the hereditary jewellery on show.

The *ksiang*, the man chosen to represent the bride's clan, presents the young man, who is accompanied by the ksiang of his own family; the introductions follow a set pattern—first the maternal uncle, then the father and finally the bride, at whose side he takes his seat.

The ksiangs recite the marriage contracts, including an inventory of the goods of each party. Then each family produces a gourd of spirits and an old man solemnly mixes their contents. Three dried fishes are then placed on the ground and over them the priest addresses the gods in these terms: "Hail! Lord of the heavens! Lord of the earth! Lord who hast created man! Since thou hast ordained that these two shall become one and rings have been exchanged, thou shalt hear, wherever thou art, that thy will has been done. They have been wedded today (here he pronounces the names of the pair); give this new

family thy blessing and show them the way, that they may know how to get rice and potatoes and where to fish."

The priest then pours spirit on the ground and counts three, after which he continues his supplications: "Hail! You, Oh mother! Oh maternal uncle! Oh father! Oh most ancient of grandmothers! Oh most ancient of grandfathers! Now that the meat has been prepared for the guests, the rings have been exchanged and the three fishes laid on the ground, hear, all you ancestors! Give this wedded pair strength and courage, that they may be happy."

He pours spirit over the fish three times, calls to witness the siem, the elders and everyone who does not belong to the same clan and then spills more spirit on the ground. The fishes are then placed on a grid over the fire and hung from the main beam of the roof while the whole assembly bursts into a triumphant cry: "Ho! Hei! Ho!"

The poor sacrifice a white cock but the rich offer a pig to the gods of the State, U Suid Nia and Ka Iaw Bei.

There must be a three day interval between the marriage ceremony and the moment when the newly-weds can live together. At the end of the three days the girl visits her husband in his parents' house, takes him by the hand and invites him to come and dwell with her.

After the birth of two or three children the pair take down the fishes hanging from the beam and sacrifice a pig.

Captain Hunt told us that on the birth of his daughter, two years after his marriage, he had the right to take his wife to the house he had had built and in which he is now living.

I should add that though Khasi women do pretty well what they like, they alone of all the Assam tribes have contracted marriages with whites. Judging by what their husbands say, they have all the qualities desirable in a housewife as well as a sense of family which is being lost in the West, and they can be wonderful mothers. I have had opportunities of convincing myself that that is true.

Night fell on the countryside, and sitting by the fire we could hear the raucous cries of migrating geese. We felt quite at our ease in this house and could easily imagine ourselves tucked away in some remote corner of England. What did it matter that the wind howled outside! We forgot all about the tent waiting for us in an enigmatic cemetery.

I had an idea that Captain Hunt must be quite familiar with the legend of U Thlen, the gigantic serpent in whose name many

murders have been, and still are, committed in the Khasi Hills district. It needed no persuasion from me to get him going.

THE LEGEND OF U THLEN

There are several versions of this legend, but the general tradition is that the *thlen*[1] is a huge serpent which causes immense devastation in the Cherrapunji region.

"In days of old there was a great market every week at the village of Langhiang Kong Khen, where there was a sacred bridge. All the sons of men resorted to that market. To get there they had to pass by Rangjirtch and a cave in which lived an enormous thlen. As soon as they arrived in the vicinity of this cave the travellers were caught and devoured before they knew what was happening to them. The thlen seemed to be operating systematically. If ten men passed it swallowed five. One half was devoured while the other came safely away. If a man was by himself, the thlen did not touch him because it could not eat half a man and leave the rest. Half a man could not continue the journey. In that way a large number of persons, both men from the Khasi Hills and men from the plains, were devoured.

"Men decided to forget their quarrels for a moment (fighting between the Assamese of the valley and the men of the hills is not a modern phenomenon!) and unite in devising a plan to get rid of the monster.

"Near the sacred grove of Laitringew there lived a man called U Suidnoh who feared neither god nor devil. No one knew better than he how to carry out such a plan and the others appointed him to deal with the thlen. He set off and as he was alone he was not devoured. He made his home on the spot and every day brought the thlen the finest beasts from his flock and the monster killed them one by one. Ultimately the thlen became quite used to him.

"When U Suidnoh arrived with his supply of fresh meat he gave the signal for the feast to begin and the serpent opened wide its jaws to take in the food. U Suidnoh made a furnace for smelting iron ore and one fine day he presented himself to the thlen holding a huge bar of red-hot iron with a pair of tongs. He told the monster to open his mouth and the creature did so. In fact he opened it so wide that U Suidnoh had no difficulty whatever in thrusting the bar right down the gaping throat.

[1] *Thlen* means serpent. U Thlen is the name of the serpent god.

"The thlen's contortions were so violent that the earth trembled and U Suidnoh fainted. From the tremendous din the men of the plain and the men of the mountains knew that something must have happened in the Rangjirtch direction and set off to look for their brave comrade. They found him and brought him round. When he was able to speak he told them what had happened; 'When I thrust the bar down the thlen's throat he writhed so furiously that I went mad with fright and fainted for the first time in my life. Now let's go and have a look.'

"They went into the cave but all they found was the corpse of the monster. The news spread far and wide and a *durbar*[1] was held to decide what was to be done with it. It was decreed that the thlen should be cut in two; one half should go to the men of the plains and the other be eaten by the Khasis. They immediately got to work and the serpent was laid out on a rock to be cut in pieces. Every man had his share. The men of the plain, of whom there were very many, ate all that was given to them but the men of the Khasi Hills, who were far fewer, left one piece behind. That is why there are no monsters left in the plains while you still find them among the Khasis.

"The famous U Suidnoh became a very great man and his name is still honoured among us.

"So be very careful when you are in those parts," he continued, "if you find that you have mysteriously lost a lock of hair or a piece from your clothes. From the piece of thlen which was not eaten there was born a multitude of little thlens which infested the region. When one of these thlens has chosen a particular house for its home there is no means whatever of getting rid of it. It may leave of its own accord but it will often decline to move even if the house is given away, sold or abandoned. As long as they are provided with fresh human blood they bring prosperity and good fortune. They make known their wants at regular intervals and unless these are satisfied they get furious and spread disease, misfortune and poverty. Many Khasis then go mad and seek for a human being to offer his blood to the Serpent God. In olden days the problem was solved by sacrificing a slave, but nowadays finding a victim is a matter of luck. A Bengali or an Assamese returning home at night on a lonely road is easy prey. When they can't get a man from the plains they look nearer home!

"The murderer uses silver scissors to cut off a lock of his victim's hair or his toe nails or fingers. Blood is then drawn through the nostrils and collected in a bamboo tube. Everything

[1] Durbar—an assembly of counsellors possessing executive functions.

is then offered to the thlen. The murderer, called *nongs-ho-noh* ('the striker') must, before committing the crime, drink a special liquid, 'the liquid which has been kept for a year'. The Khasis think that this liquid has a secret power which gives the man courage to choose a suitable victim.

"It is absolutely forbidden to use a cutting instrument of iron. Death must be caused by heavy blows from something else. Iron proved fatal to the thlen which regards it with suspicion. The murderer must take with him some rice mixed with curcuma[1] over which he has uttered incantations. The crime begins by the murderer throwing this mixture over the victim selected. A few days later a piece of his hair or his clothes must be cut off. In many cases he notices the fact and either falls ill or dies of fright—an example of magic by interposition.

"The thlen may then be appeased, though it is not certain! It will show its satisfaction by bringing wealth to the house. If dissatisfied it will make someone in the family fall ill."

"I should very much like to know what the Khasis think the thlen looks like, and how they know when he's there?" I said.

"It's very simple," replied our patient teacher. "The thlen possesses the strange power of reducing itself to an invisible thread. Everything else must be attributed to the imagination of the faithful. The *nong-ri-thlen* (guardian of the thlen) takes an earthenware pot which he can hide in some safe corner and puts into it some animal or object which he can identify with the thlen, things like an earth worm, a small snake, a thread of hemp or piece of rope. A time is chosen, generally at the dead of night, for the sacrifice. The floor of the nong-ri-thlen's house is strewn with the finest mats and the doors are thrown wide open. Someone puts down a big tray in the centre of which is the bowl or bamboo containing the victim's blood, with his nails and hair alongside. By that time all the members of the family are present and the oldest starts the incantations, accompanying them on a little drum. He calls on the serpent with the words 'Oh, U Thlen! Come, here is food for thee! We have done all that was needed to earn thy favours and have succeeded. Give us thy blessing that we may have health and prosperity.' Then the thlen emerges from its hiding-place and swells out. When it is as big as a large python it draws near and waits. The figure of the victim then appears, standing close to the plate and laughing uproariously. The thlen swallows it, beginning with the feet. It gradually vanishes from sight.

"Many strange things have been noted in connection with

[1] A reddish edible root which resembles ginger.

the thlen. If the victim selected is not murdered but only *warned* it is said that as soon as the thlen has swallowed his double he will die wherever he may be. Many Khasi families are suspected of being haunted by the thlen and given a wide berth."

The captain's words sounded so convincing that I had gooseflesh!

"How can you talk like that?" I said. "Anyone would think you'd seen the thlen yourself!"

"There's nothing to laugh about," he gravely replied. "This superstition is deep-rooted and even today the Khasis round Shillong and Cherrapunji are afraid of going out alone at night."

"But what's your real opinion, captain?"

"Oh, me personally," he answered, assuming a dreamy look. "Why, I've seen it!"

"What!"

"Don't jeer at me. I know it was a case of mass auto-suggestion, but I can't help *that*. I've seen it!"

We had no desire whatever to get back to camp and went on talking to Captain Hunt until far into the night, assisted by bottles of an excellent apple spirit which he makes himself. We learned a lot more about U Thlen, *inter alia* that all the goods, money and lands of a family under threat from the monster must be abandoned for fear that the serpent is lurking in them. As the thlen can never enter the clan of a siem—because legend has it that all the siem clans are descended from U Suidnoh—it follows that all the property of the family so threatened can be recovered by the local siem.

Captain Hunt produced a copy of the *Assam Tribune* (27th July, 1953) in which I read the astounding story of a Khasi woman who had been arrested and charged with murdering young children solely to secure their blood for rich members of her clan who wanted it for sacrifices to U Thlen. Some witnesses stated that when she stopped short of murder she took hair and fingernails.

Whatever the explanation may be, it was hard work getting to sleep that night. It takes more than the habit of wearing a coat and trousers to make a Khasi into a Christian, I said to myself. And I also reflected that I had been far less frightened among the naked men in the Garo forests!

Assam, land of mystery and sorcery! I was beginning to understand.

II

Mawphlang camp.

THE head of Mawphlang State is Robi Singh Lyngdoh, of an ancient clan of Khasi priests. We had a lot of difficulty in getting him to give us a permit to visit the villages round here as he had had no official notification of our arrival from Shillong. According to the Khasi constitution, the siem cannot take certain decisions off his own bat, as he is the head of a monarchical government with limited powers.

He had to summon a durbar, the assembly of counsellors constituting the executive over which he presides and which has judicial powers. It took a few days before the sitting could be held as all its members do not live in Mawphlang. They are summoned by a courier, a young man from the siem's family, who is provided with a knotted hemp stalk, the urgency of the business in hand being indicated by the number of knots.

Khasi administration is admirably organized and most elaborate. In every important village there is a *sirdar* who transacts the local administrative business and collects for the siem the *pynsuk* (state revenue)—direct taxes providing a contribution for state ceremonies and also the privy purse of the chiefs. When the villages are very far apart a *lyngskor* is appointed who controls several sirdars and is also deputy of the siem. There are very few private landed properties in the Khasi Hills district. There are no taxes on land and agricultural products and the only material revenue comes from the markets; traders and dealers abound and the receipts from that source seem to be substantial.

It was only two days after our arrival that we were allowed to visit the villages and I took advantage of the interval to make copious notes. The evenings spent with Captain Hunt were very rewarding, especially for a collector of legends.

The Khasis have a considerable store and they are always connected in some way with the customs and usages of the country. The siem honoured us by sending some experts to talk to us.

THE LEGEND OF DINGIEI HILL

The slopes of this hill, just north of Shillong peak, and one of the highest in the Khasi range, are dotted with a number of

villages which are all in the jurisdiction of the siem of this district.

"In very ancient times, on the top of this hill there was an enormous tree called 'Ka Dingiei' and its shadow covered the whole earth. Thus screened, the earth never saw the light and the Khasis decided to cut down the tree, thinking that they would thus make the land more fertile.

"As soon as they were all agreed they set to work with axes and sharp knives. But night fell long before they had finished and they returned home, intending to resume their task next day. What was their surprise on seeing the tree at dawn to find that there was nothing to show for their labours of the previous day! They began all over again and, as before, had to leave off before the tree was cut down. The next day the previous phenomenon was repeated. Not a single cut could be seen. They were utterly mystified and there was a storm of questions.

"Ka Phreid, a very small bird, addressed them: 'It is all because a tiger came during the night and licked the wounds made by your blows so that they healed up.'

"That night, when the men had finished their work, they left their knives and axes in the tree with the cutting edge upwards so that when the tiger began to lick the tree he would cut his tongue and go away, never to return.

"Thus the Khasis, labouring day after day, got the better of the tree and the whole earth got light and the fields prospered. Ever since the hill had been called 'Dingiei'. No one knows what became of the tree which was cut down, but one thing certain is that it left no seedlings because there is nothing like it in the world."

WHY THE DOG CAME TO LIVE WITH MAN

This legend was told us by the siem himself. It records how one fine day the dog made his home among men.

"Long ago, when the world was still in its earliest youth, all the animals lived happily together. They did business with each other and there were big markets where they met. The most remarkable was the market at Luri-Lura.

"One day a dog came along to sell some rotting peas, but no one wanted to buy such disgusting fare. Whenever a prospective customer approached the dog hailed him in these terms: 'Here! Buy some of my fine, sweet-smelling peas!' But when the

buyers got close enough to detect the frightful smell they fled in disgust, saying very nasty things about the dog. Ultimately a crowd got together and he was asked why he offered such filth for sale and his little stall was kicked and stamped on.

"The dog went off to complain to the animal rulers and in particular the tigers, who at that time were the high priests of the market. But he was fined for attempting to sell such disgusting stuff.

"When the dog saw that no animal would listen to his grievance he went off to man and said: 'Avenge me on these vile creatures who will not right my wrongs.' Man replied: 'Come and live with me and I will avenge the wrongs thou hast suffered from the animals, but in return thou must always smell their approach and warn me.'

"The dog agreed and followed man, who then began to hunt and received great help from the dog which always recognizes the smell of the rotting peas clinging to the feet of animals ever since that day when they trampled all over them in Luri-Lura market."

In the last week we have covered a lot of ground round Mawphlang, but though this is treeless and monotonous country we have never tired of admiring the view of range upon range stretching away to the Garo Hills in the west and Pakistan in the south.

Some of the villages hide away in the valleys while others dot the slopes, and all are surrounded by fine plantations. But what a vast task the cultivation of the soil represents in conditions like those found here! The Khasis employ only the most primitive of tools. They do not seem to have heard of the plough, or else they refuse to use it. Their traditional equipment comprises a rather big hoe, an axe—to cut down trees—a reaping hook and a harrow. Jean Naz, who is always interested in the agricultural side, has drawn my attention to the methods employed for the growing of rice. The rice-fields are laid out in terraces on the side of the hills and surrounded by dykes to retain the water brought in little ditches. The flooded ground is worked with the hoe and cattle are let loose in it with a view to converting it into a compact layer of mud. A small section of ground is prepared more carefully than the rest to form a seed bed. When the seedlings are about thirty centimetres high they are removed and transplanted by hand in the mud. When the paddy begins to ripen the dykes are opened so that the ground shall be dry for the harvest.

The Khasis plant maize and millet on the slopes which cannot be terraced. In this case they resort to an agricultural method not found elsewhere in India, which consists of removing the top soil in slabs and burning it. This process, even though it destroys some of the humus, has the great advantage of eliminating the seeds and roots of weeds.

There are many taboos and prohibitions attaching to methods of cultivation. A peculiarity of certain clans is their refusal to use iron reaping-hooks; as these are *taboo* the heads are pulled off by hand. "You must never sow or plant if your hand is scratched or injured, and only when the moon is waning," and so forth.

The Khasis have numerous laws relating to the distribution of land. On the high plateaux there are two sorts of ownership. Land is either public or private and this classification answers the needs of a society which for a long time was patrician and warlike, with a great number of mouths to feed, from chiefs, nobles, soldiers and priests down to domestic slaves. It was essential to find some method of overcoming the hazards of a soil which is difficult to cultivate and, in this industrial country, devise a plan for the economic distribution of labour; it was this region which for centuries supplied the lowlanders with iron. The farmers in fact fed the smelters and those engaged in transporting the metal to the frontiers of the states. But how much is really known about all this? Nothing capable of exact description except that the present distribution of land reveals that it could only have been worked out as the result of a highly intelligent distribution of labour in a highly organized society.

The public lands are divided into three categories—the *ka-ri-siem*, of which the siem has the usufruct but without power to alienate; the *ka-ri-lyngdoh*, which are assigned to the priests, though part of the rice harvest must be handed over for the ceremonies of state; the *ka-ri-shnong* which are the village lands, divided among the inhabitants and cultivated by them.

Apart from this official distribution, there are private lands belonging to the clans and extending over vast areas, which may be fertile or stony and are marked off by boundary stones. The *kni*, maternal uncle of the youngest sister of the main branch of the clan (or the heiress daughter, to put it more simply) is in charge of them. The idea is that the whole clan shall be fed from these lands, which can never be sold without the consent of a clan durbar. Women alone can be the owners of these ancestral lands which the men cultivate; the woman

who is the head of the family receives the fruits which she herself distributes among her relations.

There is a biting wind on the heights and at least a millimetre of frost on the roof of the tent every morning. Naz gets up first and makes tea. After drinking it as hot as possible I venture to emerge from my sleeping bag while the little blue flame from a tin of solidified paraffin half warms the confined space in which I shiver while I dress.

For several days we have been roaming round on watch for even the most trivial sort of festival or celebration. Luck, incredible luck, has come our way! Here is a race which has been in contact with whites for many decades, dressing virtually like ourselves, knowing enough to share in the civilized world, with petrol tins for carrying water, enamel bowls, aluminium saucepans, khaki trousers—and yet we find its original customs intact! For twenty years the aeroplane has been bringing all the corners of the earth together and agencies have been organizing comfortable tours at thousands of dollars a head. Assam has been spared. The men of the mountains and jungles have not been caught for exhibition like rare animals. In writing these notes I feel that I am giving away secrets and ruining the racial and moral integrity of the Khasis. I should not want to visit the Khasi Hills again if I thought I should find them swarming with tourists. But I sincerely believe that the day of such a disaster is a long way off.

The sides of the ravines leading to the villages in the vicinity of Mawphlang are terribly steep and it took us hours to reach them. We had to make sheer drops of three or four hundred metres and when we got to the bottom of the valleys climb almost vertical heights on the other side. The miserable villages are tucked away in depressions to get shelter from the winds and the houses seem to lean against each other. But they have good powers of resistance, though made of nothing but baked clay and held together without mortar or water. The roof, covered with thick thatch, comes down to the ground on each side and the roof line is odd, the two ends being lower than the middle.

Waiting for us in their doorways were the Khasis, swathed in their big, dark shawls, their long hair flying in the wind, and with the unabashed gaze of free, uninhibited creatures accustomed only to the noble sight of the nearby peaks and valleys. Somewhat startled by our caravan, they stood apart in little groups in a quiet clearing surrounded by memorial stones. They waited patiently to learn the reason for our intrusion.

In these age-old villages—the Khasis always rebuild on the same spot, close to their maw-bynna and sacred groves—rich and poor live together, the siem, priests and slaves side by side. To the essentially democratic Khasis it is inconceivable that the siem should live apart from his people or follow any separate mode of life. The village streets are usually staircases of big stones, so steep are the slopes. In the centre there is a clearing surrounded by a wall and always kept extremely clean for various reasons. It is there that the village law-court is held and the old men meet in solemn assembly, and it is the scene of the great popular festivals which are often attended by visitors from the villages around. Khasis of both sexes and of every age and social class dearly love a picnic. Any season of the year seems suitable for a walk in the hills, not too far from the sacred groves where the god U Blei Rynhaw lives. Their jollifications provide a spectacle quite as exciting as a carnival in other countries.

The high plateaux, lonely, eternally battered by the winds, and a certain asceticism in their way of life, give these people a very special something, that grave and nostalgic element which is the very essence of their music. When I think of the wide spaces of the Khasi country, fragments of their melodies immediately come to mind. There is nothing remarkable about that, as their festivities are usually an excuse for a regular orgy of song. Music, that strange art, a compound of abstractions and mathematics and yet capable beyond all other arts of giving the soul a tongue and subtly transforming words! How often in the late hours have I known the very being of these people revealed in their unique form of melody, with the vibrations, tones and blending of voices which are all their own and yet express the struggles, the passions, the sorrows, the noblest and most personal faculties of all men everywhere. It was Khasi music which introduced me to the Khasi soul and it is through that music that, despite time and distance, it is still so close.

One day an incident occurred in which we thought we could detect the shade of U Thlen. At Dympeh, some ten kilometres from Mawphlang, Mukherjee, Paulus, Naz and I were all together in a house and busy with our particular occupations. We had been working up enthusiasm over the possibility of recording the local music. Night fell before we had finished and we had to think about where to find quarters in the villge. If it is not easy to visit a Khasi house in the daytime, it is infinitely more difficult to get an invitation to remain! In this land of mystery, dominated by superstitions innumerable, there are more inhibitions than among any of the primitive peoples we know, and with most of these taboos we are unfamiliar.

Our interpreter's verve and persuasive powers had secured us the privilege of sharing our hosts' evening meal round the fire and for a long time we were content with drinking cups of tea and exchanging smiles. The singers had gone home. Towards ten o'clock, when we were wondering what part of the house would be assigned for sleeping quarters, the door suddenly opened and a dishevelled girl, looking very frightened, came in. She was one of the daughters of the house. She began to talk in nervous, staccato tones and everyone crowded round her, uttering loud cries and wails. Before the din died down it was impossible for Paulus to give us the explanation of this strange scene, which was that the village was the home of a nong-shonoh (whose identity everyone suspected) and the poor girl had just felt a hand thrust into her shawl in the dark. The shawl was in fact tattered and torn, having been slashed with a pair of scissors.

"I'm very much afraid that we shall have to leave the house," added Paulus after this preliminary explanation. "The presence of strangers cannot be tolerated when such a threat is hanging over the family. The lyngdoh is to be summoned."

Paulus was obviously very ill at ease as he told us all this. Of course we had to go, even though it was night. Mukherjee's teeth were chattering (he said it was the cold!) and we were pretty shaky ourselves. How frightening the ravines seemed on our long walk back. To be at close quarters with the secrets of the Khasi night was an extraordinary experience. To this day we are not sure we did not see ghostly figures in the mist and hear mysterious voices in the wind.

The day we left Mawphlang the siem invited us to attend a trial. We were told all about it by Paulus, who translated what the "town crier" was shouting in the street: "Hei! Villager, old fellow, young man. Hei! Boy, child, little one and big one. Hei! All ye who hear my words, leave your houses and draw nigh. Hei! Draw nigh for the durbar; there is a case to be tried. Hei! Listen closely! Ye shall cease from cutting wood or fetching water or working in the fields. Ye must harken and leave whatever ye are doing. Hei! for the siem. Hei! for the lord and master of these regions, or destruction will fall upon your heads."

When this announcement is made no one has any right to leave the village and any disobedience is punished with a fine.

Our water-carriers stopped in their tracks and retraced their steps. They had heavy work ahead of them as they had to descend a steep slope to find a clear stream in the valley two

kilometres away. The water-carrier's job is one of the most lucrative in Khasi villages.

The same evening the proceedings of the durbar began in the little clearing in the centre of the village. A young man had carried off a girl.

One of the notables opened the session with a speech which had nothing to do with its real purpose, to which he made only a few furtive references. Other notables replied and there was quite a debate which gradually warmed up as it got closer to the object of the meeting.

At a given moment the plaintiff, who is the maternal uncle of the girl, and the defendant threw down their turbans containing the betel which is the gauntlet. The siem began to speak and ordered the durbar to hear the witnesses who swore to speak the truth, the oath being taken over a jar full of salt placed on a sword.

The debate lasted only two hours as there had been no assault on the girl's virtue. The offender got off with a fine of money and a pig, which is supposed to be offered to the goddess of the state but will in fact serve for a good feast for the siem and the members of the durbar. The siem cried out: "Is this not right, young people?" and the members of the jury replied: "Yes, this is right, young people!"

Certain offences are punished more severely. A murderer is "ignored" if he can put forward U Thlen as his excuse. Otherwise he is beaten to death. In some cases there are extenuating circumstances, e.g. where a man catches his wife *en flagrant délit* and kills her and her lover. In this case he is condemned to pay a heavy fine and give two pigs to the village. The penalty for killing a thief is the same. A sorcerer is punished with exile if he did not use magic to bring about the death; if he did, he is thrown over a precipice.

The Khasis have one punishment which could almost be called "nice". The offender is placed on a bamboo platform under which pimentos are burned. It seems that the resulting smoke has an extremely unpleasant effect. It can make the eyes run for several days.

As we were walking along Paulus asked me if we had divorce in my country.

"Oh yes, we have divorce and it's very much on the increase!"

Among the Khasis divorce is in fact not only admitted but a very simple matter. Married couples separate for many reasons —adultery, sterility, incompatibility of temper—and divorce is generally a matter of mutual agreement except among the

Pnars where either party can demand a divorce on paying an indemnity to the other.

Divorced persons cannot remarry into the clan of their former spouse. A woman cannot divorce if she is pregnant. The divorce procedure is quite simple; there must be two witnesses and each party produces five rupees. The wife gives hers to the husband who mixes them with his own and hands the lot back for her to shake them up and return them to him. He then throws them on the ground and at that moment a slave, acting as "crier", runs through the village calling out:

"Harken, villagers! K—— and U—— have separated today in the presence of the elders. Hei! all ye young men who are not yet wed, come and court K—— who is no longer the wife of her husband; come, ye maidens and court U—— there is nothing to prevent it!"

When one of the spouses stays away for a very long time and gives no sign of life a divorce is officially pronounced in the presence of the siem and the elders, for the race must increase and multiply and the clan produce fine children. The relations of the missing spouse are present at this ceremony and go through the formulae which the occasion prescribes.

Speaking generally, polygamy does not exist among the Khasis, but a man may have a mistress before he marries provided that she does not come from the same village as that from which he will choose his future wife. The children resulting from these associations are called *ki khum kliar*, "children of the tops", in contrast to the children by the legal wife, the *trai*, or "roots". The explanation is simple. The "tops" are the branches of the tree which are worthless unless it has good roots. In many cases the wife adopts the bastards, especially if they are girls.

The mistress is called *ka tynga tuh*, "the stolen woman", and her children, unless adopted, have no right to inherit from their father.

The practice of adoption is very common among the Khasis. When there is no daughter one must be obtained elsewhere. She is called *rapiïng*, "the woman who brings aid to the house"; she inherits all the family property and takes on all the burdens. She was chosen for that very purpose. There is nothing more disastrous than to have no daughter. It means the extinction of one branch of the clan. Who will be available to perform the funeral rites or to place the bones in the family tomb or observe the ceremonies due to the ancestors?

When a whole family becomes extinct its property reverts to the siem of the state in which it resided.

During our stay at Mawphlang we became aware of the importance of eggs. A present of eggs is the height of courtesy among the Khasis. Our good Paulus, the interpreter, made a point of bringing them almost every day. The siem gave us a little basket of fresh eggs and Captain Hunt sent us some with a piece of bacon which he had cooked. It will be long before Jean and I will forget that piece of bacon. Such a present had not come our way for months!

Superstitions about eggs are very ancient among the Khasis and take innumerable forms. Anyone who finds difficulty in speaking in public will be cured if he eats rice boiled in an empty duck-egg shell. Many divination rites are based on the supernatural qualities with which eggs are endowed. They can cause dire calamities, produce diseases and accidents, destroy animals. During the burial ceremonies eggs are laid on the dead man's stomach and then broken over the pyre.

In every Khasi house there is a board on which they break an egg to read the future or establish the causes of an illness. In the second case the procedure is as follows:

The diviner sits in front of the board and sprinkles it with some red earth from a bowl. In the centre he places the egg and a little heap of rice. When he has got the egg upright in the rice he utters various incantations and then picks it up again and smears it with red earth, still mumbling his magic formulae. When he has finished he turns the board over, spilling the rice and earth on the ground, and then props it up on a piece of wood with the handle turned towards him. He then gets up and, aiming at a circle in the centre of the board which is called the "boat", throws the egg down on the board as hard as he can.

The position of the shell fragments *vis-à-vis* the "boat", and whether they come to rest concave or convex, are the determining factors in the interpretation.

From the replies of the diviner to our questions it emerges that if all the pieces of shell round, but not inside, the "boat" have the convex side up there is no reply to his question, and the same applies if there are no fragments at the nearest part of the circle.

In the opposite case distinctions must be drawn:

1. The shell fragments lying to the right of the "boat" are called *ki jinglar*. If all these pieces are convex side up it is a good sign, but if only one is convex it is a bad sign and means *ka sang long ka*, "the sin of the father or the son", or *ka maw lum*, "it comes from the rock in the ravine", i.e. the mountain spirit is the origin of the illness.

2. The shell fragments lying to the left of the "boat" are called *ki jinkem*. It is a good sign if they are convex.

But these fragments are not of equal importance. If one is concave it is a very bad sign, but if another is concave it matters very little.

3. A row of fragments running from the far left-hand corner foretells death. It represents the route to the funeral pyre.

4. Concave fragments directly opposite mean trouble from the evil eye.

5. If there are concave fragments in line with the handle,

6. If the point of impact (recognizable by the biggish piece a god must be appeased with a sacrifice.

6. If *s*, the point of impact (recognizable by the biggish piece of shell adhering to it) is outside the "boat" the god or goddess invoked is very angry; a pig must be sacrificed.

The ceremony of the broken egg is an almost daily occurrence among the Khasis; it is the prelude to every important undertaking such as building a house or starting on a journey.[1]

Cherrapunji Camp.

Cherrapunji is thirty miles south of Shillong. After Sohrarim, a military post, a "controlled" zone is entered and a special pass is required as the Pakistan frontier is not far away. For many kilometres the landscape is fiendish. Not a house, not a soul could be seen. As the road ascended the country became more and more desolate and apocalyptic. The pine forests became few and far between and then disappeared altogether as if swallowed by the precipices we encountered. This arid region cannot be compared with any other. One vertical cliff followed another, bare rocky shoulders towered overhead and heaps of stones came falling down on to the track ahead and behind.

When we were six miles short of Cherra I got out of the truck, not liking the dangerous proximity of the ravine. On one side the wheels were half on the road and half over the edge of what appeared to be a bottomless gulf.

A cold rain was beginning to fall when we caught sight of the first houses of the little town, strung along the flat top of a hill. It is approached from a vast inclined plateau, four or five kilometres long by three wide, which comes to a sudden stop at its edges. Behind vast ravines, always concealed by the mists arising from them, Pakistan spreads her carpet of rice-fields.

The only spot of colour in this gaunt scene was the white

[1] This description was supplied by the siem himself and was compared with those given by the professional egg-smashers of Cherrapunji and Jowai. There are slight variations, but no fundamental differences.

Catholic cathedral of the Salesians, which was built quite recently. There we were received like members of the family. Father Tonello, a Spaniard with a face worthy of Goya, suggested that we should pitch our tent in the outbuildings of the old church, built sixty years ago. While we were installing ourselves in the teeth of the wind we had a fabulous sunset to look at. The missionary pointed out a number of tall black stones, all exactly alike, on a hump below and told us that these were the graves of about a hundred English soldiers who had got desperate and committed suicide in the rainy season. In this part of the world it rains uninterruptedly from May to September. The mean annual rainfall is fourteen or fifteen metres, but the maxima are amazing—one metre twenty in twenty-four hours and twenty-two metres in a year.

At night the wind rose and we were thankful to be sheltered behind the old walls, walls with the savage grandeur of a scene from Dante, dominating the plateau on which Cherrapunji lies. Mukherjee had left us to find quarters in the miserable and freezing rest-house. After a nightcap of powdered milk we were soon asleep in our tent.

The silence of the night was interrupted by a weird cry in the distance, somewhere among the ravines. I pricked up my ears and held my breath; Pheoo-oo-oo, Pheoo-oo-oo! Be warned; everywhere you go death in frightful form is dogging your steps. . . . Pheoo-oo-oo.

It was only the barking of jackals, that sinister refrain of Indian nights, but I had been surprised in my sleep and did not recognize it. My last recollection that night was of it starting up again.

Dawn came as sleep deserted me and next morning I had no trouble in getting out of bed. Fairyland was at my door! Through the flap of the tent I could see the white blanket of frost as if it had been snowing. The sky was an unbroken expanse of orange-red. The earth had vanished. Below me a sea of pink clouds, a puffy mass of serried waves, spread out to the horizon. I might have been carried up to heaven while I slept! I turned round and saw the cathedral, as pink as all the rest, three hundred metres from our camp. Two dark forms approached us—Father Tonello and a little Khasi boy, eight or ten years old, dressed in an American overall.

"Up already!" the priest exclaimed.

I suspected that something out of the ordinary was occurring and pointed to the sea of clouds under the dawn sky.

"Yes, it's a wonderful spectacle at this time of day, but you have to be at the top of the hill to get the benefit of it," he added. "Within an hour the mist will come right up here and wrap us up completely until midday when for a moment the sun will dissolve the lot except in the ravine down there. These lovely colours don't last long! At dusk there will be a similar display before darkness falls. During the monsoon we have nothing but rain and dense mist. There is no sky and no light. Quite frequently the wind joins in and gives us a roaring hurricane accompanied by terrible shocks—an earthquake or a fall of rock over the precipices."

I began to wonder how men could stand that sort of thing.

"How long have you been here, Father?"

"Twenty-two years. But I haven't come for a chat. I have to take Mass. I've brought Salomon with me. He's my adopted son. There's nothing he doesn't know. Take him with you and make him work. He can light a fire, wash up and fetch water."

I was given no time to thank the Father, who vanished as if by enchantment and left me there, arms akimbo, with Salomon who stared at me with a knowing look and turned on his heels. The little slant-eyed elf vanished, leaving me annoyed with myself as I ought to have made some friendly gesture such as offering him my hand.

Jean Naz lifted a flap of the tent. His face was puffy with sleep.

"What a devil of a row these beastly jackals made! I haven't slept a wink. Ghastly country!"

The mist was already creeping round the tent pegs and the sky clouding over. Fairyland had vanished. But here came Salomon with a big load of wood. In the shelter of a wall he lit a fine fire without uttering a word.

Mukherjee has been roaming round the streets of Cherrapunji. He finds the rest-house most uncomfortable as the chilly air gets into every corner. But what is the answer? He would not join us here for all the money in the world. We arranged to meet him to inspect the innumerable maw-bynna to be found among the scattered buildings of the town.

The aspect of the great granite plateau where we took our walk is lugubrious in the extreme—there is no other word for it. Naz made a little hole in the ground and uttered a cry of delighted surprise:

"Have a look!"

He picked up some tiny pieces of scoriae looking like tear drops.

"These are relics of the famous Khasi iron foundry," he said. "How exciting!"

A curious object, rather like a primitive comb, attracted my attention.

"What's that?"

"It's all speculation, of course, but I believe that the Khasi, having no real forge, were obliged to melt down their iron into little ingots. For that purpose they thrust stakes into the sand to make moulds about the size of a large pencil. The moulds were connected by a small trench into which they poured the molten metal. When the iron cooled down in the channel it took roughly the form of the back of a comb, while the moulds represent the teeth."

While we are at Cherrapunji we are to make a round of the principal districts of the state which are all under the jurisdiction of the old siem, Join Manik, omnipotent in these parts and grandson of a historic figure. When resisting English penetration into the Khasi Hills by the valley of the Surma, this celebrity saved the life of the British leader, David Scott, who was so grateful that he never violated the compact then arrived at that the independence of the Khasis of Cherra should always be respected. Unfortunately, his successors were less scrupulous and occupied several districts.

We spent a whole day with the siem and acquired a lot of enthralling information about the clans, especially the local warrior clans.

The Khasis have never been head-hunters, Join Manik told us, though there is mention of heads in the worship of U Syng Kaï Bamon, the most important of the gods of war. He is described as the god to whom the victorious warrior offers the head of his enemy. Today the god is propitiated by the sacrifice of a cock, its head being stuck on the point of a spear.

A very ancient form of trial by ordeal, the U Klong, prevailed in war time. It was a terrible punishment because the Khasis believed that a perjured man ought to be eliminated, together with all his family. Sometimes this type of ordeal resulted in wholesale massacre, so it was never authorized by a siem or lyngdoh. The choice was left to the parties to the dispute. U Klong was proposed by one side and either accepted or rejected by the other. A pointed stake was thrust into a bowl of fermented rice. The individual wishing to take the oath produced another jar of rice, covered over, and the same stake was driven into it. Both were then handed over to the judge who

addressed a goddess in these terms: "Come down among us and bear witness, O Goddess, thou who reignest on earth as in the most remote corner of the sky. Thou hast made man, thou knowest the true and the false; come among us that we may know which is telling the truth. If the man's accusation be false he shall be hung from the cliff, he shall lose his life, he shall lose his clan, he shall lose his wife and children. There shall remain but one pillar of his house; its stone walls shall alone survive and fire shall spare nought but his hearth-stone. He will be ravaged by disease, pierced by an arrow; his corpse shall be devoured by the crows and the vultures and his clan shall vanish from the earth. He shall become a mangy dog, a jackal dragging its tail in the dirt. Thus shall he be chastised by thy hand and the hand of his fellowmen. But if his cause is just his affairs shall prosper, he shall live a long life and become an elder and the defender of his clan. All the world shall envy him. Harken, O goddess, thou who judgest . . ."

The judge then apostrophizes the fermented rice: "Thou, O yeast; thou, O wood ash, thou, rice of our fields; harken and judge. If he takes a false oath tear out his tongue, destroy his lips!"

The pointed stake is then addressed:

"Thou, O arrow, who piercest and tearest the flesh at the command of the goddess who created man to make war and till the soil, harken and judge. If he who is about to take the oath is a perjurer let him fall upon thy point. Pierce him, tear his flesh and inflict wounds innumerable upon him!"

Then the man places the gourd representing U Klong on his head and repeats the same invocations. Anyone prepared to take this oath wins his case.

Ordeal by water was, and still is, very fashionable among the Khasis. In the simplest form, two jars are filled with water into which two coins, one silver and one gold, wrapped in a little piece of cloth, are dropped. Both try to get this object out and the first to succeed wins the case. If they get it out together the durbar arranges a friendly settlement and if the ownership of lands is in dispute these are fairly divided.

One ordeal by water which was once in vogue among the Khasis is retained as a sporting event. Two spears are fixed in the bottom of a rather deep pond. Two competitors dive in simultaneously and each catches hold of a spear. The winner is the one who is last to come up.

Same camp.

This evening a number of young men and girls sang outside

our tent. Jean Naz has fixed up a stove for burning wood and made a hole in the canvas for the vent. It lets in the wind, but what does that matter! No one minds.

Late at night the musicians went home in a body, still singing lustily. A Khasi never goes home alone in the dark but is always accompanied by some friend who will stay the night with him and find a meal prepared in anticipation. The significance of this arrangement is that even a man who is "possessed" by the U Thlen will never attack anyone who is not alone.

"If I come back to your country," I remarked to Paulus, "I'll take good care never to go out by myself."

"Whatever you do, don't come in June or November, as there are other complications. You'll find yourself left to your own devices. Those are the months of *Ka Sang Kla* during which people round here are not allowed to visit strangers. This taboo rules twice a year and the prohibition is absolute. Every villager must sleep in his own house in his own village. Nor may he share a meal, or smoke or chew betel with anyone except persons from the same villge."

There are other taboos which are even more rigid, e.g. marriage within the same clan, which is called *kaba shong sang*. These words are seldom uttered in Khasi country as anyone who violates this law will be punished to the end of time. He will lose his right to the normal interment. His bones will not be placed in the family tomb but scattered in several ravines so that he will spend eternity in looking for them.

The spirits of such malefactors are to be feared, for it is they who seek vengeance by playing evil tricks on the living. So it is not advisable to linger by the edge of precipices after dark.

The fresh, cold air of the Cherra plateau did us good after our long sojourn in the unhealthy jungles of the Garo Hills. My face was so tanned by the wind and sun that I had practically ceased to look European. Jean, under his beard, looked like a tramp! As for dirt, the less said the better. The cold was so fierce that we limited our washing to the tips of our noses.

Our food came from what remained of our stocks and what we got by hunting and fishing with the natives. Incidentally, these expeditions produced much colourful information. The natives never go off hunting without first observing the broken-egg ritual and sacrificing a cock or chicken. Then the dogs are put on a leash, and kept at heel until they strike a trail. Then the battue begins. The first to wound an animal is entitled to the biggest share. Of a goat or deer he gets the under side, though

not the feet. The second partner gets the fore-quarters. The rest is divided between the other hunters and the dogs. Such hunts may well last a whole day. There is a special taboo relating to tigers. When one of these animals is killed its head is cut off and taken to the sacred grove to be placed on a large flat stone at the foot of an oak. A ceremony in honour of the god of the state completes the ritual.

One evening Paulus came along to tell us of the birth of a son in his sister's house. We were invited to join in the celebrations, an occasion which brought us a new discovery in the shape of the Khasi carrying-chair, in use solely among the steep Cherrapunji hills. You get into a sort of basket with a seat and a canopy and are carried on the back of a porter.

The grandmother arrived in this fashion, as she lives a long way away on the slopes of Laitkynsew. The porter, one of her slaves, has no other job but to carry her whenever she wants to visit her children or go shopping in Cherrapunji. The poor woman seemed terribly upset. She had dreamed that her daughter had given birth to twins of different sex—an occurrence of evil augury among the Khasis! When the world began there was only one man and one woman and so the arrival of twins seems an anomaly, especially if they are not of the same sex. It means that there has been a case of incest within the clan and the birth is thus regarded as a warning from the gods. Hence the custom of killing twins. Their bones may not be buried in the family grave.

At birth the child's navel string is never cut with a metal knife—which is taboo—but with a bamboo sharpened at one end. There is special treatment for the placenta which is put in a pot and kept until the ceremony of the fall of the navel string, when sacrifice is offered to the genii of the waters and the sacred groves.

In these days everyone turns up for a child's baptism. The women of the clan prepare rice flour and strew it on a bamboo winnowing-fan mixed with dried fish. The pot containing the placenta is placed in the centre of the house. If the child is a boy, a bow and arrows are laid alongside this pot, but in the case of a girl these are replaced by one of the rattan thongs which the porters pass round their heads when carrying baskets on their backs.

An old man appears with a jar of spirits which he slowly pours over these objects while reciting a string of names. The child is given the name which comes up at the moment when the last drop falls. The priest says prayers to the gods of the

The *lyngdoh*, or Khasi priest, chases away evil spirits with his baton before the arrival of the young girls for the dance of Nongkrem

The Dance of Nongkrem

clan and the father takes hold of the pot containing the placenta, shakes rice flour and fermented rice into it and swings it rapidly three times over the child's head. Then he goes outside and hangs the pot from a tree. Before returning to the house he must wash. He rubs a little rice flour on his right foot as well as those of the mother and child. All the guests imitate him, but smear their left foot. The bow and arrows or the porters' thong, as the case may be, are then hung from the roof and the ceremony ends.

Our evening with Paulus ended with an excellent meal of chicken curry, dried fish and a selection of cakes.

Against the background of this fantastic landscape, worthy of a Walt Disney nature film, we have witnessed one of the greatest solemnities of the Khasi calendar, the celebration of the harvest. On this occasion the virgins wear their astonishing national costumes, a mass of gay colours, and the extraordinary and most beautiful gold and silver jewellery which most of the rich clans have possessed for centuries and is handed down from mother to daughter.

The finest of these ceremonies is held at Nongkrem, a mountain village in the state of Khyrim to which we climbed, with considerable effort, on our return from an expedition in the valley of the Surma, on the Pakistan frontier. The first love affairs of Khasi boys and girls mark the conclusion of this festival and take the form of "courts of love".

It is a gorgeous affair, attended by all the lyngdohs of the clans, and the scene of action is just outside the sacred grove. All the villagers in the vicinity send offerings of goats, cocks and food required for sacrifices to the goddess of the harvests so that the next lot of crops may be good. Some of the men, resplendent in jewels and wonderful turbans, perform a dance facing an altar, to the accompaniment of much waving of their famous fly-switches (which is also a feature of the ceremony of nominating a new siem) while others dance under the sacred beam inside the house of the hereditary high priestess of Nongkrem, Ka Siem Sad.[1]

Then comes the ritual dance of the virgins in a big field. The girls take small steps and hardly lift their feet from the ground; their arms hang down by their sides and they never raise their eyes. The most remarkable of their ornaments is a big amber necklace, "the water pearls", *k'pieng*, the treasure of the clan, each drop approximately the size of half a hen's egg. Their heads are adorned with the *passniat*, a wonderful affair which is

[1] Or Ka Lyngdoh.

a sort of heavy silver crown trimmed with flowers. Circling round them, two or three men dance, leap and pirouette while waving fly-switches and a little red flag which is supposed to keep evil influences at bay. The musicians, forming a small group on the flank, set up a tremendous din, banging out traditional rhythms on their tam-tams and doing wonders with their flutes and cymbals.

It is a great day for the eligible girls, as it gives them a chance to show themselves off in all their beauty and finery to the "boys", with every prospect of finding a husband in the next twelve months.

The villagers provide the spectators at these dances, but married women are not admitted. At the conclusion of the proceedings the young men, the prospective bridegrooms, come for the girls and, firmly clasping the maiden of their choice, return to the houses for the "courts of love", celebrated with much feasting and drinking. Yet anything beyond a public flirtation is not permitted. The singing goes on far into the night—long after the old folk are sound asleep under the heavy thatch of their roofs.

Our northern skies have never known, and will never know, such dense clouds as we get here. They rise from the ravines, make straight for us at an extraordinary speed and mass over our heads. With anxious eyes we scan the sky in vain for something else besides these ragged monsters. There was no hymn of praise in my heart this morning, though in fact it has brought me an opportunity—for which I had longed in vain—to be present at a burial. Since we came to Cherrapunji, a good month ago, there have been several deaths but we have never been invited to a funeral. Mukherjee did his best for us at a village in the Mawsmai direction, but he got a poor reception from the inhabitants, who threw stones at him. The Khasis are extremely secretive about everything relating to their funeral observances. Certain parts of the obsequies are actually carried out by the deceased's clan without the clan with which he was associated by marriage having any right to participate. The dead man belongs to his clan; his secret burial is its affair and that of the god U Blei Rynkaw.

In the village to which we were invited the chilly houses were wreathed in clouds. We entered an open courtyard where a cock was crowing. A little stone staircase led up to the main room. Paulus quietly opened the door of the vaulted chamber. It was so dark that hardly anything could be seen, though holes in the tumbledown roof admitted four rays of light which

miraculously pierced the darkness and concentrated on the catafalque and the greenish hue of the dead woman's face.

The *koublei*[1] were exchanged and dark shapes crowded round us. Sitting round a brazier, the only means of heating these flueless houses, we witnessed the final preparations before the corpse was burned.

It had been in that room for three days. Paulus explained that the moment anyone dies his family call out his name three times in his left ear. If there is no reply they burst into tears and a period of three dawns is calculated from that moment. At nightfall of the third day the remains are removed from the house for the cremation ceremony. Just before sunset the women wash and perfume the body and arrange the limbs in an attitude of repose.

In our presence the priest sacrificed the cock we had seen in the yard. He cut its throat and collected the blood in a little bowl. The blood is the offering to U Thlen. A long investigation, which would exceed the limits of this book, would be necessary to disentangle all the Khasi beliefs on the subject of death. It is said that anyone who dies with his limbs extended and wearing a happy expression is a good man and has every chance of being happy in the next world, whereas a man dying with his limbs drawn up is a bad man, even if he has been a model of virtue all his life.

All the details of the obsequies of this woman, who was head of the clan, were relics of the religious observances of neolithic times. In days of old there was a curious custom that when a woman died her husband must necessarily follow her—a practice characteristic of absolute matriarchy and ignorance of the processes of conception.

The funeral pyre was erected at the top of a hill near by but the family and close friends could only follow the cremation proper from a distance. The corpse was placed on the pile of wood but the proceedings were screened from view by cloth hangings all round.

Only the widower and the maternal uncle were allowed near the pyre; it was their duty to throw the dead woman's clothes, the remains of the sacrifices, betel and eggs on to the fire.

When the cremation was over, the bones of the head, neck and vertebral column, as well as the sacrum and ribs, were picked out and put in a pot which was handed to the youngest daughter. She pronounced the usual formula: "Farewell, go and chew betel in the house of the gods," and then threw rice, flour and spirits on the embers of the fire which gradually went out.

[1] God keep you!

The deceased lived in her husband's house but the bones will not remain there as they must be returned to her clan for interment in the secret ossuary of the family in the depths of the sacred grove. No one, not even the widower, must know their final resting place.

The custom is the same in the case of a man who, after death, must be returned to the clan of his birth. Only the priests and the youngest girl in the family share the secret of Khasi burials.

After nightfall I spent a considerable time roaming round the village with Paulus. This morning's piled clouds had vanished, revealing serene depths of sky, dotted with stars, above our heads.

"The rain has kept off," I remarked to my companion.

"We rarely get rain at this time of year."

"But the sky was pretty black this morning."

He pointed to the rugged mountainside where the dying flames from the funeral pyre were still flickering. "That's not surprising! We Khasis live in the clouds; they're around us all our lives and never leave us. When a woman who is head of a great clan leaves us for the hereafter it is quite usual to see them gathering from all quarters to bear away her soul."

Jaintia Hills.

The track between Shillong and Jowaï, twenty-five miles east, climbs bare, rugged slopes to reach a plateau. It is seldom used and the number of Europeans who have passed that way, particularly in the last few years, is very small. But though this trail is sometimes guesswork, studded with deep ruts and becomes almost impracticable beyond Maw-Ryng-Kneng, the trip is well worth while if only because it takes one into some of the most picturesque parts of the Jaintia Hills.

We are already in the first half of March and our time is getting short. In three months the south-west monsoon will arrive, bringing with it the great rains which drown the roads. So we have no time to lose, seeing that we propose to return to the Goalpara district by a long détour which will take in the lower stretches of the Himalayan foothills extending beyond the north bank of the Brahmaputra on both sides of the "Inner Line".

Three days after our arrival at Jowaï we decided on an expedition to Nartiang where there is a curious collection of hundreds of cenotaphs.

After Wahjajer it became a question of walking and we had

six or seven miles of monotonous, rugged trails. The soil was a bright red colour. To our right we had several wooded heights and before us an imposing purple mountain mass barred the whole horizon from north to east.

The village of Nartiang is one of the last before the Pnar country reaches the hills where a very secretive people lives concealed in dense jungle. Unfortunately, we shall never see them. Today's trip could well be a sort of prelude to a more extensive investigation of the Jaintia Hills during the next dry season.

The faces here are not of the same ethnical type as those of the Khasis of Cherrapunji and Mawphlang and the houses are built differently. We are back in the jungle, and bamboo abounds. The general appearance of the villages is less austere, though the tribes are much more homogeneous.

We set up our little camp close by the entrance to the village. Mukherjee tried a few questions but got no replies and all that Paulus could provide was an opportunity to photograph a few groups. It is almost impossible to photograph a man or woman by themselves. I think we shall have to stay here several days and I am satisfied we shall never know more about them than what we think we know already.

The Pnars inhabit the whole mountainous *hinterland* bounded on the north and east by the regions occupied by the Mikir and Cachari, two of the most ancient Tibeto-Burmese races, of Bodo origin, who are related to the Koch, Mech and Boro tribes of the Goalpara and Darrang districts in the Brahmaputra valley. The Pnars are savage, hirsute mountaineers, with hair falling to their shoulders. They are protected from civilization by the tangle of their mountains and the impracticability of all the approaches.

The trails end near the village of Nartiang, on the circumference of a circle of wonderful hills the centre of which is six or seven kilometres from here. There was something unreal about the scenery, due to the slender giant bamboos which cover the slopes with a filmy lace of the most delicate green. Canoes were slowly gliding over a little lake, their occupants pulling up nets in which they collect the flowering aquatic plants which they burn to use the ashes for salt. Great flocks of wild duck and teal settled on mud banks gay with lotus and pellitory. Towards evening a gentle breeze ruffled the surface, the lake turned purple and the sky became a riot of colour in the dying sunlight.

By the reedy banks behind our camp there was a small clearing in which were perhaps a dozen standing stones called *U h'e*

Maw in Pnar, which simply means "big stones". We were promised an opportunity to visit what we had come to see, eight miles away in the forest. It is said that one of the monoliths is twenty-eight feet high.

Our route lay through the last rice-fields and marshes of the lacustrine valley when we left at dawn next morning. Then a bad, steep path began to wind among the bamboos and bush. The point we were making for lies two hundred and fifty metres above the plain. The moment they caught sight of us the women fled back into their houses, which are made of dried earth and barely two metres high. They are not as comfortable as Khasi houses, and we have our doubts whether they are even clean.

In a little enclosure facing the door three or four branchless tree trunks had been fixed; their tops were crudely carved and a bundle of thin bamboos sprouted from them. From these bamboos an extraordinary collection of amulets was suspended —egg shells, red rags, bunches of reeds, worthless beads, odd bits of metal from food boxes picked up at Shillong and brought to these parts by travelling salesmen. These fetishes are a characteristic feature of Pnar villages.

All round this clearing were the fields in which tobacco grows like weeds. Behind the house the women were busy, weaving, smoking and looking after their children on a sort of platform with a thatched roof.

A few hundred metres from the village there was a regular forest of standing stones. Many had been thrown down or fractured by the earthquakes which afflict this district from time to time. A number of small huts had been erected round these monuments and we were informed that the place was a considerable market which is much frequented during the winter by the inhabitants of the mountain villages.

This evening, instead of returning to Nartiang we camped in the open among these mysterious stones, which were by then wreathed in mist. We might have been in the heart of Brittany among the menhirs and dolmens of Carnac if it had not been for the local vegetation, that infernal buzzing of mosquitoes which we had forgotten since leaving the Garo Hills and the occasional cry of a hunting tiger. The Pnar villagers were beginning to recover from their fright; curiosity triumphed and they came out to stare at us in silent amazement. With their dirty rags and ears distended by the ivory corks or the small wooden discs which some of the women string down to their shoulders, they remind me of the Lissous I met in Yunnan.

What can one write about these cenotaphs with their

mysterious secret? The natives told us nothing about them and I am sure that they have nothing to tell.

We spent some days at Jowaï before going on to the river Kopili. If we can use the ferry to cross it we shall try to take the new strategic highway through the mountains to Haflong, in Cachari country. Everyone tells us that we shall find the going hard; the route is at the foot of a range of high, jagged blue peaks which stretches away to the eastern horizon. But the question is whether we can cross the Kopili. The next part of our journey lies in a region which is made difficult not only by its geography but by its savage inhabitants.

After some British officers had been sacrificed to U Thlen in the Jaintia Hills the English annexed all this part of the high plateaux. Even today you will be told that the Indian rajahs of Jaintia themselves offer human sacrifices to Kali the Black and this cult seems to be concentrated round the Kopili, which is also a much-worshipped goddess. According to some reports two human victims a year are offered to the deity of these waters in the months of *U'naiwing* and *U'nai prah* (November and December). These victims, who are first taken to the *hat*[1] of Mawsmai, are there treated with the greatest consideration. Then they go to a place called *Ka Ieu Ksih* ("the place of sacrifice") on the banks of a tributary of the Kopili. They are never seen again. It is said that a particular clan from a state governed by the siem of Raliong (on the road from Jowaï to Garampani[2]) carries out the executions and that the practice is of very ancient origin.

Many people never cross the Kopili at all and others never do so without preliminary sacrifices. There is another strange custom. Every traveller to Haflong, in the Cachari Hills, must leave his provisions behind him even though it is quite uncertain whether he will find anything to eat on the other side. This superstition has had very awkward consequences for foreign visitors unaware of it. Until quite recently it was necessary to arrange for relays of coolies on the far bank of the river, as the Pnar porters threw away their loads and refused to cross.

I have heard that in many remote corners of the Jaintia Hills fêtes are held to propitiate Kopili. At Nartiang there is a hollow called *Ka Umkoi Kopili* where sacrifices are offered regularly. One of our camps was established there, close to the standing stones by that little lake I liked so much. I am sorry I did not

[1] Market.

[2] Hot springs a hundred metres from the Kopili.

know about it at the time as I should certainly have tried to do something to get on the right side of the exacting goddess.

As soon as we left Jowaï we had a rough, stony road and were constantly bumping our heads against the roof. We had only one spare spring leaf, but it was the back axle which worried us most. We got to Raliong without too much trouble but after Nongryngkoh we were seriously wondering whether we should be able to proceed. The track follows precipitous gorges, is not provided with walls and crumbled under our heavy vehicle. Night was at hand. In the failing light we carried on, holding our breath, though Paulus remained as cheerful as usual while pointing out the landmarks to Naz. Driving became increasingly difficult on the narrow, wet road, cut out of the side of the mountain and nowhere buttressed. The road narrowed but became easier as we entered a valley leading north which I think can never see the sun. We found ourselves faced with a little dilapidated bridge of logs and bamboos. As we did not like the look of it we decided on an inspection before committing ourselves.

Naz pulled up, but before he could get out the truck began to move forward towards the ravine before we realized what was happening. In our headlights the sides of the road seemed to flash past like a nightmare and we were soon hurtling along, making a terrible din. There was a sudden stop and a violent crash which sent us all flying forwards. I hit my head against the windscreen and for a few moments was unconscious. When I came to myself I was lying in the mud and Mukherjee was offering me a drink. I had a glimpse of disaster, the end of all our hopes! We were at the bottom of the ravine but a providential tree had arrested our descent and we got off with nothing worse than being buried under an avalanche of earth and stones.

We all set to and got out the spades and shovels. Our servants, who came off rather badly because they were in the back, went hunting for bamboos and rattans. Paulus went off to get help from the nearest village, which must have been the Kopili frontier post, the river being the boundary between the Jaintia Hills and Cachari districts.

Four days later it was possible to get the truck moving five or six metres at a time.

To me it seemed a miracle that the vehicle could be got going at all but there our luck ended; there was no ford by which we could cross the Kopili. But we decided to get on to Haflong

somehow as we wanted to be present at the markets which are visited by a large number of tribes. We left the truck in charge of Naz, with the weary and worried Haricharan Das to keep him company, and set off for the other side of the river. Thus was tradition respected! In a small canoe we crossed the fair Kopili, flowing smoothly between the splendid dark green forests on its banks.

We soon reached the hot springs at Garampani and had a wonderful bathe in water with a temperature of 40° cent. (104° fahr.), but we could not linger in this marvellous natural watering-place, the praises of which were sung centuries ago under the name of *Ansuya Kund* ("boiling springs") by the bards of the *Mahabharata*. (In 1949 a governor of Assam built a charming stone swimming pool.)

We pitched our tent in this enchanting spot and after a good meal went to bed. At dawn some fifteen Mikirs arrived at our camp. It is they who offer their services as coolies on this side of the river. There is no means of transport short of Khrongma, twelve miles away.

Next morning Mukherjee, Paulus and I set off on foot for Haflong by the new trail. It is not kept up and there was nothing for it but to hew our way through the high grass and bamboo which are infested with leeches, which swarm on the slopes. The sun had been down four hours when we reached the military camp at Khrongma. It is surrounded by vast plantations of pineapples, cotton, pimentos and sugar cane. From there we went on to Haflong for a stay of six days. It brought us back to civilization in the shape of a little train on the only railway in Assam, the line connecting the Brahmaputra basin in the north with Silchar in the south and running through the jungles and mountains of Nowgong and Lumding.

At the little station of Haflong I said good-bye to Mukherjee who, ill and worn-out, is returning to Calcutta. I myself am returning to Garampani by the same route as I came, but by jeep this time, at any rate as far as Khrongma.

The Khasi country I have taken so long to appreciate, and the feeling of melancholy and apprehension induced as the weird light falls on the mountains and the heavy clouds envelop them—these seem to me to constitute the greatest if strangest attraction of Assam. One cannot help sadly wondering what the future has in store for these men of another age who are gradually being introduced to the life of the modern world.

Gauhati, March 1954.

We have been initiated into Assam. We have found our Book

of Revelation in its jungles, with their strange and heady scents, and its desolate uplands inhabited by aloof and hostile peoples. It could not be otherwise, seeing how close has been our contact.

The kind of superstitious awe which obsessed us in the valleys at the approach of night has left us for good. The magic remains, but we know what it is. The sun, tired of being a nuisance, is descending behind the hill of Nilachal where the goddess Kamakhya dwells. Silent shadows fall upon the Brahmaputra, a river so wide that on the horizon it seems to merge with the sky. The lightest of breezes sways the arecas and blue smoke arises from each mud hut. The half darkness in which man lives is dense but not intimidating. Safe with his flocks and his loves, night brings him relief from the too solemn grandeur of the wild landscape, in which nothing is on the human scale, a world meet for gods, and gods alone.

We stopped at the busy university and commercial town of Gauhati only long enough to visit the Kamakhya temples where the whole religious history of Assam is told in a series of sublime sculptured frescoes. These temples are not as famous as those of central India but are far more vivid. They are things of flesh dedicated to exacting and cruel gods. Here old Assam lives again, the Assam that looks up at us from the manuscript poems in ancient Assamese script on the oblong strips of *sanchi*[1] bark. Imaginary as some savants say that they are, the adventures of the Bodo kings, as recorded in the *Bansabali*[2] and edited by the learned men at the court of Rajah Nar Narayan, of the royal family of Koch, moved me greatly. It may be safer to rely on mussulman writers and the *Buranjis* of the Ahom, but it is from the ancient sanchi text that I have learned the bloodstained history of the temples and cults.[3] With the help of Ralph Fisher, and in his steps, I have searched in the plains for the people he described in the sixteenth century when he was visiting this region: "They have extraordinarily long ears, not less than the span of a man's hand, which they purposely distend when they are young. Their colour is yellow and some of them have such thick lips that they seem to have had a negro ancestor . . .", an allusion to the Mongol skins and touch of negrito blood inherited in the valley which was the home of the first ancestors. Although the practice of distending the ears has vanished from the plains, it still exists among the Garos and Pnars, and is even

[1] *Aquilaria agallocha.*

[2] In 1556.

[3] There is a summary translation of these texts in J.A.S.B., Vol. LXII, printed by the Baptist Mission at Calcutta, 1917.

more prevalent among the Daflas and Apa-Tanis of the Himalayan foothills.

On the banks of the Brahmaputra we found the old Bodo tribes slightly Aryanized and Hinduized, thanks to the skill of the Brahmins in endowing their savage chiefs with divine powers and incorporating them as terrestrial sons of gods in the Hindu pantheon. The priests excelled in this art of transformation and these barbarians were by no means averse to becoming Hindus and finding themselves heirs to thirty centuries of unbroken civilization. The Brahmins thus discovered that the Koch were descended from the god Siva himself through their chief, whose mother was no other than the goddess Durga-the-Wild-Beast, daughter of the Himalaya. All the subjects of these Koch kings, automatically deemed to be of the *Kchatriya* (warrior) caste, abandoned their tribal designation and called themselves *rajbansis* (sons of kings), all the tribes descending from the same line and the same clans—in short, from the same family! The result is that in the Hinduized lowlands the caste system is not so strict as in India. In fact it hardly exists. Men are distinguished by rank or fortune, but in the palaces queens play with their servants in the evenings.

Since their Hinduization the Kochs, who had hitherto associated and intermarried with the other hill tribes, have broken off all relations. Some of the Kochs, such as the Boros, Mechs, Rabbhas and other tribes who have remained fundamentally animist and independent, keep to themselves in the jungles in the south of Bhutan.

The Koch kings and chiefs were made of strange stuff and I prefer to think of them as original brigands rather than as described in Brahmin chronicles—pious monarchs, zealous worshippers of Siva and Durga, rebuilders of the Kamakhya temples and patrons of an impressive number of priests whom they had invited from Kanaudj, Benares and other Hindu holy places. If they were pious they were certainly ferocious as well. During the reigns (1515-80) of Koch kings whose descendants are living today as hereditary rajahs in the town and district of Cooch Behar, north of Goalpara, it is said that the army leaders could produce two million men.

The temple of Kamakhya was several times destroyed in the course of civil wars. Nar Narayan rebuilt it and an amusing legend has gathered round this event. "Fascinated by the charms of the goddess, he wanted to win her love. The wily lady was agreeable but stipulated that in one night he must restore the edifice, build a great reservoir and construct a huge staircase to the top of the hill. Nar Narayan had all but completed

his task when the cock crowed, on the orders of the goddess and certain Brahmins who were watching. So the king's love was not rewarded and remained purely platonic. But the Hindu priests regarded the king's idea as sacrilegious and sought means to punish him. They told him that the goddess would dance naked every night behind closed doors. The king immediately desired to see such a performance and asked a *sadu*[1] to get him a sight of the fair dancer wearing nothing but strings of jewels round her neck, wrists and ankles. The sadu showed the king a tiny peephole in the wall. That same evening the monarch looked through the hole but his eye met the goddess's. She was so furious that she had the priest killed. As for the unfortunate king, he and his descendants to the end of time were forbidden even to cast a glance in the direction of the hill."

The injunction is still in force. The Maharajah of Cooch Behar pays large sums annually towards the maintenance of the temple but he has no right to set foot on the hill of Nilachal —the home of the elusive goddess—and, on the days of the great ceremonies, he must be hidden behind a veil and a purple and gold canopy (the mighty Kamakhya's colours) if he goes anywhere near the temple.

While Brahmin influence was thus spreading all over the plains from Kamrup to Goalpara a slow anti-Aryan reaction developed like the fermenting heat in the humus of the soil. Faithful to their respective traditions, the Koch and other tribes continued to worship their ancient deities which they more or less assimilated to the new ones, thus producing a strange amalgam which was to give the Brahmaputra valley its particular religious physiognomy. Even the Hindu priests bowed before facts. The autocthonous cults revived and flourished mightily throughout Assam. The Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation disappeared and gave place to an animist variety. The theme of tribal devotion and mutual aid prevailed —as it does today.

The "goddess-mother" resumed her rights and her religion then reached its apogee. The sacred writings show that in the thirteenth century "a man without stain is the most acceptable sacrifice to a god" and the manner in which he must be slain is set out in detail. Human sacrifice was restored and flourished, thus contributing to the still existing reputation of the Assam "native" for evil customs. Many Bengalis never think of going outside their own territorial limits. It is the women who are

[1] Mendicant priest.

particularly feared hereabouts. Are they not reputed to be "sorceresses having the power to change men into animals"?

There are many legends about the worship of Kamakhya, the mother-goddess, who must surely be associated with that "ancestral grandmother" of the Khasis whom the Bodos have transformed into the "female goddess" Kamei-Friai and the Hinduists, not to be outdone, have tried to convert into the goddess of reproduction in the legend of the grief of Siva who lost his wife Sati and wandered all over the world carrying the corpse on his back. The anxious gods took fright and sent out Krishna to find him. Krishna decided to get rid of Sati's body in the hope of relieving the sorrow of the god of the gods. He followed Siva round the world and cut Sati's body in pieces which were all scattered over different parts of the earth's surface. But it was not by chance that the goddess's sexual organ fell on the hill of Nilachal, near Gauhati, at the very spot where the mother-goddess, symbol of reproduction, had been worshipped from time immemorial by all the races which had dwelt there in succession.

Nothing much is known about the temple in days of old, but it seems certain that the first rites were celebrated in a cave which sank lower and lower as the result of earthquakes. The temple was built and rebuilt over this cave, which now extends far underground. It is reached by a steep staircase of great stones which have been polished by the millions of naked feet passing that way through the centuries. By the dim light of two oil lamps I had the luck to see the moving emblem, a *yoni*, at the far end of the grotto. I ought really to have been wearing Hindu dress and covering my face with a fold of the sari, as no European is entitled to enter the sanctuary of the goddess Kamakhya. The extraordinary feature is that the edifice, unlike other Hindu temples, contains no representation of the goddess, but at the end of the dark and dripping cavern there is an enormous block of stone in which the yoni, the female sexual organ, has been rudely carved. This stone is kept continuously moist by a natural spring at the back of the cave. A feature which strikes primitive imaginations even more forcibly is that at certain times of the year, particularly during the first great monsoon rains, the water runs red owing to the laterite in the soil through and over which it flows.

In conformity with the taboos affecting Indian women at their menstrual periods, when the spring water is running red Nilachal is considered impure and the Hindus observe the traditional regulations; neither the water nor any crops grown in the ground affected may be used. The natives drink milk and

live on fruit while the peasants refrain from ploughing lest, as they say, "they tear the belly of the mother, the belly of the mother-goddess of the gods."

Pilgrims come from all parts, even southern India, and barren women congregate to invoke help from the goddess of reproduction and implore her blessing.

Sacrifice is freely offered to Kamakhya, expecially at this time of the year. The list of suitable creatures is very long: birds, turtles, alligators, fish, buffaloes, bulls, goats, boars, rhinoceros, antelopes, lizards, deer, tigers, and all are represented on superb bas-reliefs in the main temple. But human sacrifice remains the most highly prized, and anyone can offer his own blood. In days of old such volunteers were called *bhogi* and from the moment they announced that they had been summoned by the goddess they enjoyed certain privileges; they could do exactly what they liked and all women were at their disposal. When the annual festival came round they were executed amidst general rejoicing.

Can we be sure that these sacrifices are outmoded?

PART IV

WILD NORTH BANK

FROM the point we had reached in Upper Assam during the last days of March it was not easy to get to the northern banks of the Brahmaputra. The two usual crossings over the great river are at Gauhati, still a long way off, and Goalpara where we crossed on our arrival last September. But on an old map we found some traces of a road flanking the Inner-Line from Sadiya to North Lakhimpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. We threw dice and decided to try our luck with Sadiya, the last town short of the Tibetan frontier and Tirap with its impenetrable jungles.

Making slow progress over difficult ground, we found ourselves in a cul-de-sac. Sadiya is little more than a few rickety houses in the heart of a district which was ravaged by the earthquake of 1950 and last year's disastrous floods. Three months later, when the rains came, what was left of Sadiya disappeared in the inundations. Our expedition, then in Goalpara district, was completely isolated by the floods for two months. The only vegetation to survive was the skeletons of a few trees shorn of their branches. Dubious tracks branched from the road towards the great swamps of Lohit. There was no point in our trying them; we should never have found our way back.

How could we get to the Inner Line and the Apa-Tani tribe we hoped to visit? Another leap in the dark; we would try the crossing at Dibrugarh. The road ran through a valley in which there were some Abor villages.

For more than a century the turbulent Abor tribes, living on the Himalayan range that we can see from here, have played a traitor's part in the frontier dramas of north-eastern India. From 1848 to 1900 the English mounted something like ten futile expeditions against them. One such, at the beginning of the century, ended in a treaty which was not respected by the tribe. The war flared up again in March 1911, when the political officers of Sadiya were horribly murdered in a village near Kebang while on a friendly visit to the Abors. A carefully

prepared campaign opened in October 1911 and lasted until March of the following year. A burden for India financially, it became a military disaster and even the further objective of exploration was not attained and remains unachieved today.

The Indian Geographical Service then set up a fictitious frontier between Tibet and India—the MacMahon Line—but in fact an immense territory which is almost wholly unknown stretches south from it as far as the Inner-Line that we hoped so much to attain.

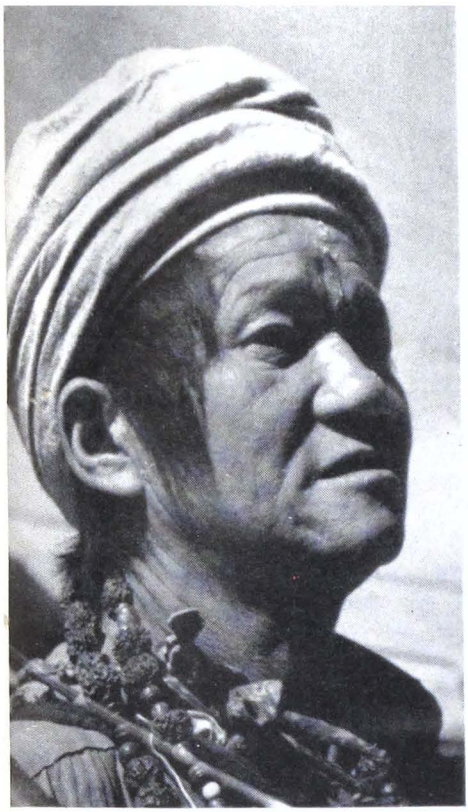
More than forty years have elapsed since the 1911 expedition and the Abors have not become any less fearsome. A few months ago an Indian military expedition was exterminated and the two Native Affairs officers who commanded it were murdered.

The head of the expedition, a Sikh colonel, whose intentions were nothing if not friendly, set out to reconnoitre a little-known region inhabited by Abor Tagins who are hereditary enemies of the Abor Galongs. Not having been long in the country and knowing nothing about it or its internal feuds, he took with him some fifty Abor-Galong porters. When the party of a hundred or so arrived among the Tagins, the latter supposed they were facing a Galong attack supported by Indian troops. All the Indians were massacred and the Galongs carried off into slavery.

The new administrative methods adopted by the N.E.F.A. will prevent a repetition of such a mistake, but even today it is impossible to get anywhere near this part of the mountains where Abors, both Galongs and Tagins, live, all Tibetan tribes of the same group.

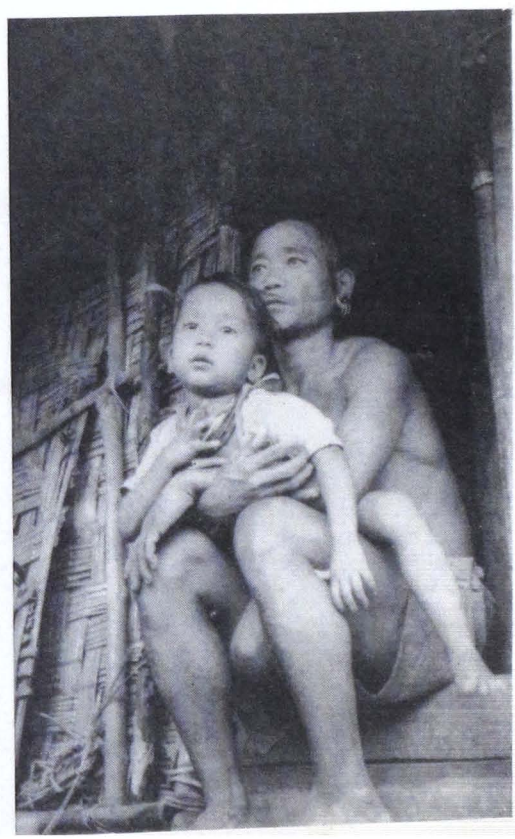
The valleys leading up to Rima are inhabited by the Mishmi, another Tibetan tribe. In 1885, a French missionary named Kirk was killed by them and this region was isolated for years. Later, the English mounted an expedition against these hill-folk, a troublesome lot though not as turbulent as their western neighbours, "they that dwell across the river", as the Mishmi say in speaking of the Abors.

Between Sadiya and Dibrugarh we stopped several hours at a tea garden managed by Peter James at Bisukubi near Dum-Dum. An ex-officer in the Anglo-Indian army, he is still young and energetic and knows all about the region north of Sadiya, now called "Siang Frontier Division". As a high ranking official in the "Native Affairs Department" he has familiarized himself with the most intricate trails in the Mishmi and Abor foothills during the last seven years. He is still very popular and even "taboo" among the tribes, who recently made an official request

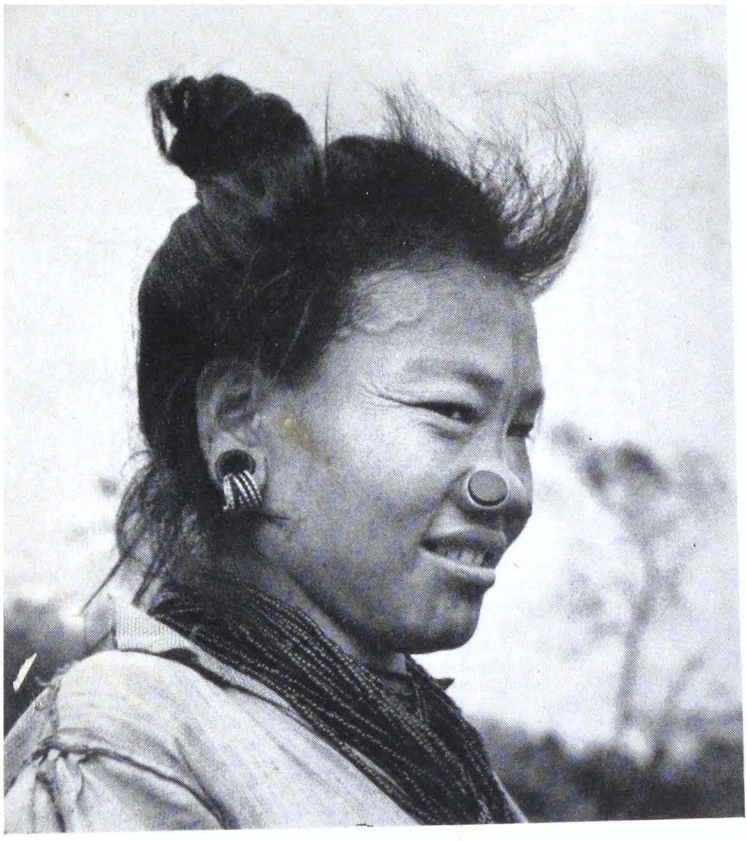


(*Above*) Bhutanais woman

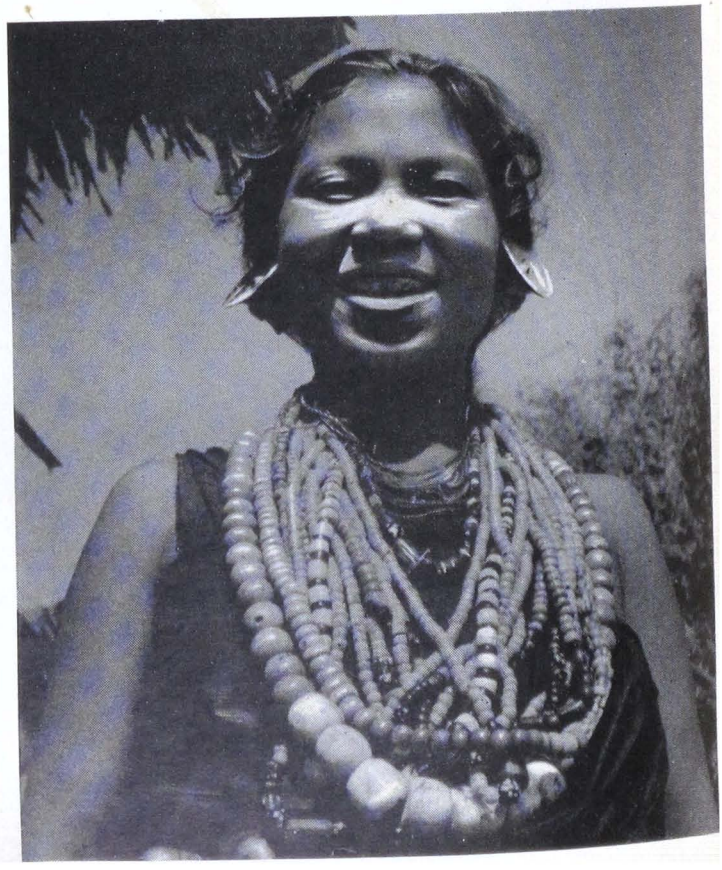
(*Above, right*) Young Daxla man



(*Right*) Apa-Tani man with son



Apa-Tani woman



A Daxla woman

to New Delhi for his return among them. He alone has their confidence because he alone knows their customs and way of life. He would like nothing better than to rejoin them and has even suggested that he should adopt Indian nationality. But obviously it is a tricky business.

"If I continue to live so near the frontier and look after this tea garden, it is because I cannot deny myself the sight of the snowy Himalayan peaks where I spent my youth and the happiest hours of my life."

He poured out an inexhaustible flow of memories with such an intensity of feeling that his ruddy cheeks paled.

At Dibrugarh, a dilapidated ferry-boat carried us across the great river. The weather was magnificent, the waters of the Brahmaputra sparkled and dolphins played on the surface. The other passengers inspected us with astonishment and an intelligent youth who spoke some English assured us that we would not get very far with our vehicle.

True enough, a quite incredible section of our journey lay ahead of us on the north bank of the river. Determined as we were to see our mad enterprise through, after leaving Sonarigaon we immediately took the jungle trail. We crossed small water-courses on improvised bridges which have not been repaired for many rainy seasons, but we are so familiar with these fragile affairs that we crossed them without a thought. After an hour on the track it became a question of dodging all the obstacles—large holes, fallen tree-trunks, places where the ground was so sodden that the tyres would simply stick fast or slide.

Should we ever reach that wild right bank about which no information has been forthcoming—perhaps for the good reason that there is practically no traffic in the immense jungle which stretches from Sadiya to North Lakhimpur in one vast expanse of virgin forest.

The roads marked on our map probably anticipate a future which is still problematical as the difficulty of crossing the great river has actually increased in the last few years. Since the 1950 earthquake, the Brahmaputra has several times changed its course at several points. It is wider in places and has created new islands, long strips of sand on which thousands of pelicans gather. At some points the river bed has risen so much that navigation has become impossible. During the monsoon, from May to November, all river traffic is at an end above Dhubri and the river leaves its bed and floods the countryside over an area of five or six miles. The small railway line which enters

Assam at Siliguri, passes through Gauhati and reaches Silchar through the jungle, is blocked by inundations throughout the season of the great rains. It takes a month or two to rebuild and repair the embankments, so regular communication with the rest of India cannot be counted on except from January to April. These are not the only reasons for the isolation of this region; from north of Goalpara to Sadiya at the beginning of the Himalayan foothills there runs the "Inner Line", marking the frontier of the *twice forbidden territory*.

The problems of the N.E.F.A. territories which extend north of that frontier have been increased as the result of the political changes which have taken place on the far side of the Mac-Mahon Line. Communist China is now the guardian of Tibet and an atmosphere of apprehension prevails among the tribes now exposed to foreign infiltration.

We forded fifteen rivers and each time Naz accelerated madly and we got through without serious damage. The weather was more or less kind to us all day but as we dodged our way through ricefields and rivers, muddy trails and swamps, the risk of coming up against some insurmountable barrier increased. In my heart of hearts I knew that we had been a bit crazy to set out on such a venture.

Night fell. Ahead of us the jungle opened out into a vast, bare clearing. There was no sign of the villages we had hoped to see. We were lost in the dry bed of the Jipa Dhoi river. Our miserable map indicated that this superb torrent flows through the forest reserves of Lower Subansiri, the point where our road began to drop down.

We gingerly picked our way between rotting vegetation, stones and sandy pits, quite unable to see anything beyond the range of the head-lamps. The ground seemed treacherous everywhere. Suddenly the back of the car sank up to the hubs. Naz grovelled on his stomach to explore the damage. At first he noticed nothing. Our steering-gear can stand anything. For two hours he dug furiously while I boiled the rice and made some tea. In an oppressive silence jackals howled quite near us and at the verge of the jungle we heard the familiar growl of a tiger.

Once out of the mess we were in, we had only to keep north, using our compass. There was no moon. Jean was at the wheel and I sat on the roof of the lorry. For a quarter of an hour we crawled along, a prey to nameless apprehension. Then we stopped. A row of trees loomed up ahead and I thought I heard a distant tam-tam. Or was it the thumping of my own heart?

No, it really was a tam-tam. The trees seemed to be screening some huts. Men emerged.

We spent the night in the truck at Bardalani. The astonished villagers gaped at us as if our Delahaye were disgorging woodland spirits. Of course no one spoke a word of English and when we tried to find out if there was a ferry at Chauldhoa all we got was conflicting gestures. By this time exhaustion had made us thoroughly pessimistic and we went to sleep fully convinced that we should never get across the Subansiri.

Next morning, when we poked our heads out of the lorry after a refreshing sleep, a wonderful scene met our eyes. The sun was shining on the Balipara mountains and snow was still lying on the north-eastern crests of the Upper Subansiri, 19,000 feet above sea-level, among which hides the far-famed valley of the Apa-Tani, one of the last peoples still veiled from the world's eyes.

We managed to make the villagers understand that we should like one of them to go with us, but they all refused to cross the river (if indeed there *was* a ferry!). They were xenophobes, whose one desire was to get rid of us as soon as possible, but for a consideration they offered to guide us to Chauldhoa where we could send an S.O.S. to some tea gardens in the vicinity. It was our last chance and so we decided to face this last lap, driving doggedly over every sort of ground at forty-five litres to the 100 kilometres![1] If we were held up we could return to our starting point at Sonarigaon, recross the river and make for Jorhat, a little further downstream where there must surely be other roads—less interesting no doubt—to the north. We could not continue wandering about at our own sweet will in search of non-existent ferries, using up our petrol stocks and prejudicing our prospects of return to the Brahmaputra.

As we had expected, the river bank at Chauldhoa was as bare and ravaged as it had been at Sadiya. At high flood last year, the Subansiri changed course for several miles, sweeping away everything in its path. There was no sign of any ferry. The natives crossed in canoes. A Chinaman who seems to have settled in this infernal region told us that he would notify our arrival to the villagers on the far bank and try to find an old ferry-boat belonging to one of the plantations. Naz preferred to go with him and I stayed behind alone in the car. It was about midday; my colleague would not be back until 6 p.m. and I resigned myself with a heavy heart to a tedious wait. No doubt my low spirits were explained by the great areas of swamp—

[1] 6 miles to the gallon (Tr.)

father and mother of fevers—and the fact that we had weeks of exhausting struggles behind us.

My friend returned in a little local skiff, a kind of flat canoe, which looked like a swallow from a distance. He was accompanied by the Chinaman and an Indian who introduced himself as Sri Banerdjee, manager of the Ananda Tea Estate on the other side of the river.

Jean told me that this charming person had ordered the plantation coolies to repair the ancient ferry-boat which had not been used for years. Does anyone cross here, anyhow? Another small craft came towards us bringing Sri Banerdjee's servants. They started to set up camp for the night near the car, as no crossing was practicable in the dark. We took our sleeping bags and other necessaries with us and started off for the plantation. A fine flight of mallard rose from the sandbanks. Jean, who had not lost his sense of humour, muttered "*Some* supper!"

But I worried about leaving the truck on the bank. It contained all our treasures, especially our photographic and cinema gear! Jean guessed what was troubling me.

"These people strike me as all right," he said. "I think you're worrying unnecessarily. You should have seen the trouble our host took to get the ferry hauled out of the mud and the way he set about procuring a guard! But I'll go back if you like. . . ."

But by then we were halfway across and I did not want to upset our host.

The Ananda Estate looked pretty grim. What a scene of desolation! Nothing had been kept up and the scrubby tea bushes were a sad sight under the pallid shadows of the withered *albisia molucana*.[1]

"I know what you're thinking," Sri Banerdjee explained. Poverty and neglect! But what can I do? I'm paid fifty rupees a month[2] and of course my employees get even less. The owner of this plantation lives in Calcutta where he has several cinemas on which he makes much more. So he's not much interested in tea! I came here as a refugee from Dacca in Pakistan, where I had a small business. I lost everything in the 'Partition' and am lucky to be living here with my family instead of starving somewhere else. . . ."

All the tea gardens we had come across hitherto in Assam belong to big English companies who have been established here for fifty or sixty years and by an agreement with the new Indian

[1] A species of big tree which, with the *stipulata* and the smaller *crotalaria*, protect the tea plants.

[2] We paid Peter, our bearer, twice as much!

government will continue to enjoy their privileges for another fifteen years.[1]

Near the dilapidated bungalow my attention was drawn to a colourful group of Miri hillmen. I had not yet met any of these big opium growers who live in the Himalayas and are called "Loba" by the Tibetans. (Incidentally, the latter give the same name to the Apa-Tanis and Daflas.) So we saw our first specimens of a Tibetan tribe who have never crossed the Brahmaputra and make their homes in the mountains to the north—they only come down to the valleys for a few weeks each year to do business in the *mellah*, those great markets held in the dry season all along the Inner-Line.

Like the lowland Daflas, the Miris barter their opium and mountain plants for salt, cloth and iron in the villages of Rangajan and in the north of North Lakhimpur, and even as far as Charduar itself.

For a tribal people they are remarkably tractable and they have never questioned the civilization or the authority of the plains. In a sense they are vassals of their more famous and turbulent neighbours, the Abors and Daflas.

The whole area of which anything is known at the present time is inhabited by the Dafla-Miri, who are actually two branches of the same tribe, the Daflas living west of the Apa-Tani valley, between that valley and Aka country, and the Miri living in villages to the east between the Apa-Tani and Upper Subansiri.

Ananda Tea Estate.

The repairs to the ferry-boat took much longer than we expected. The planks had to be renewed entirely and two pontoons sunk into the soft, slippery ground round the two wharves. Naz directed the operation, often working with the men. During this time I made a tour of the district with Sri Banerdjee who proved a kind and agreeable companion and did everything he could to make the time pass pleasantly on his uninviting plantation. By day we visited the Dafla villages in the plain and in the evening he organized santali dances. A great many of the men and women of Chota Nagpur work on the North Bank tea gardens. They are more or less the nomads of the great Indian tribes, living and travelling in organized bands, boasting of their exploits, dancing and singing in the market places, much like our own gypsies and sharing their dubious reputation as sorcerers and thieves.

At Dulangmukh, on the Inner-Line, we stayed for three days

[1] Assam produces two thirds of the world's tea.

among the Daflas and became very friendly. How far we seemed from our own clean Garo villages! Splendid, dirty savages though the Daflas were, they were none the less thrilling!

When the Japanese reached the frontiers of Assam during the last war the Indian Government suddenly realized the danger to its vulnerable north-eastern borders, especially the frontier with Tibet. It then appeared that between longitude 93° and 97°E the boundary between the two states was ill defined. On the Indian side, the Himalayan chain covering the Assamese Upper Subansiri territories south and south-east of the Tsari district in Tibet had never been prospected.

This was the reason for the 1944–45 mission entrusted to C. F. Haimendorf, an English anthropologist, by the University of London. He it was who opened the secret doors of these unknown valleys and described the Apa-Tani enclave as a survival of late neolithic culture in the heart of the Dafla country, to which it none the less presents a strange contrast. The only sequel to this ethnographical and geographical expedition was the scientific reports published by its leader, which are still the sole source of worthwhile information about the Subansiri tribes.

But I should not omit to mention that the 1912 mission was much struck by a strange people "inhabiting a smiling valley" and, from the agricultural standpoint, enjoying a civilization more advanced than that of the Daflas and Miris. But that had been thirty years before and the valley had subsequently returned to its almost legendary isolation.

After Independence, and as the result of the innumerable problems of re-organization within India, these regions were no longer visited and practically left to themselves. The whole area between the Kamla river and the valley of Upper Subansiri, the Agla Marra of the Miri tribes, has remained entirely unexplored, a genuine *terra incognita*. Yet with proper organization it would not be physically impossible to explore it by the new road down the valley of the rivers Sipi and Mongo. Some day, quite soon perhaps, Indian officers of the N.E.F.A. will escort a scientific mission to try to draw these unknown frontiers on the ethnographical maps of the world.

During the winter of 1953–54 the N.E.F.A. actually resumed its slow investigation of these human colonies living in time-honoured peace and security in this incredibly fertile region.[1] Even the short visits we have been lucky enough to make to a few Dafla and Apa-Tani villages have made us realize how

[1] Known as *Subansiri Frontier Division.*

greatly these tribes, who were living in the Stone Age only five or six years ago, have been isolated from the world.

A few months ago a map covering the whole area explored by C. F. Haimendorf was published by the Chinese Peoples' Republic. The Chinese frontier appears as deliberately crossing the mythical MacMahon Line, running along the Inner-Line of Assam, skirting the plantations where we are now and incorporating Abor, Miri and the Dafla Hills, which have always been administered by the Government of Assam. It is quite natural that the N.E.F.A. has taken certain steps to avoid having such a vast no-man's land at India's back door.

It took only a few days to find an Apa-Tani village which overlooks the Dulang valley inside the Inner-Line. The settlement of some hundreds of Daflas and Apa-Tanis in the foothills of the Himalayas and the valleys near the Inner-Line is a very recent development. Some of them, mostly ex-guides and interpreters of the Haimendorf mission, have become "employees" of the Indian Government as delegates of their tribes. Thanks to them there has been fairly regular communication between hill and plain. We also found there the devoted natives who served as escorts to the political mission of Lt.-Colonel and Mrs. Betts in 1948–49, the second and last visit of Europeans in this region prior to our own. Thanks to the kind offices of Sri Banerdjee, and on condition that he went with us (he readily agreed), we obtained permission to visit the Apa-Tani hill country. We had no intention of engaging in serious investigation but simply wanted to take photographs and make some films to be shown in Europe later on. They will be the first documentary material about this tribe.

We got together all our travelling gear, small tents and bedding, toilet articles and cameras. We also took a heavy box stuffed with coloured pearl beads, which we had always failed to induce the Garo and Khasi tribes south of the Brahmaputra to accept. (We were determined to get rid of them, even surreptitiously! In the result, they enabled us to acquire the collection of Apa-Tani and Dafla objects which we brought back for the Musée de l'Homme.)

We had to find a reliable escort for the stiff 3,000 feet climb up the valley of the Dulang.

There was any amount of game in the surrounding forests, which are regarded as one of the greatest game reserves in Assam—buffalo, bison, elephant, tiger, leopard, bear and many species of deer. It is also one of the few remaining haunts of the Indian *unicornis* rhinoceros, now verging on extinction. About

three hundred of them are left, scattered round the Subansiri and over the Kaziranga reserves on the left bank.

We had with us three Daflas from North Lakhimpur, one of whom, Bat-Héli, a quite uninhibited young man, is chief interpreter of the Subansiri Zone; the other two were porters from the little village of Dulangmukh.

It was not long before we had a demonstration of the violent strain in the Dafla character. Bat-Héli, very jealous of his position as my sole and personal porter, lost no opportunity to play some nasty trick on any of his companions who offered to help me in any way.

We had been three days climbing steep, rugged slopes, innocent of anything approaching a proper road, and toiling up doubtful tracks screened by thorn bushes and tall sharp grasses over two metres high and over stones and ditches which were nothing but traps for our feet. One morning our porters ahead got out of sight, so hard was it to keep up with them. When we struggled to the top we had a splendid view of the bare and solitary peaks in the distance, but no one was to be seen, a development which was most disconcerting as we had no idea where we were.

Suddenly one of our Dafla escort darted out like an evil demon from behind a bush. I gave a shout. Had we came up against one of the bandits supposed to be infesting these frontier zones? Where had he come from? Was he alone? I was walking with Banerdjee, who was unarmed, and Jean Naz was ahead and out of hearing. A ridiculous icy terror ran down my spine, banishing common sense. Banerdjee too did not know what to think. The Dafla produced his long Tibetan knife, a superb weapon for cutting down the thorn bushes in my way. Then he came forward, baring his fine teeth in a carnivorous grin and held out his free hand. I hesitated to extend my own; I knew that these tribes have a playful habit of chopping off hands. He burst out laughing and said something in his guttural native tongue as he gripped my arm.

Something I could understand at last! He pointed to the sharp drop immediately ahead and the rise on the far side over which Jean Naz had now disappeared. He had only wanted to make himself useful! He must have watched me laboriously scrambling up the slope, yielded to a kindly instinct and come back to help.

I took advantage of his offer and the tall, well-built rascal pushed and pulled me along, roaring with childish laughter when I stopped for breath or showed him the innumerable bleeding scratches on my legs.

The Dafla guides and porters, and even Bat-Héli himself, were still out of sight when, at about five o'clock in the evening, we decided to stop. But what next? They had the tents and all our bedding! We halted at the top of a hill and had a big surprise to see a pretty bamboo hut near a spring at the bottom of a hollow. I went forward and almost ran into Bat-Héli, as I was triumphantly hauled along by his compatriot.

After the strain of climbing I was glad to feel the cool mountain wind whipping my face and restoring my spirits, and it was with an indescribable feeling of relief that I sank down on our bedding which had arrived ahead of us. I was all in! What should I have done without my Dafla? I was about to ask Bat-Héli for the name of my rescuer when he turned grey with rage, seized my unfortunate escort by his woollen scarf and began to knock him about. Both pulled out their huge swords. The other Daflas made futile attempts to separate them. My shattered nerves were not up to any further strain but I felt I must intervene. I yelled at Bat-Héli and, as he did not hear, walked up to him, risking a nasty backhander, and put my hand on his shoulder with a friendly grin. Taken aback to see me so close, he dropped his arms and changed colour. The blood came back into his cheeks. All was well! I handed him my Rolleiflex, which he knew to be so precious that I never let him touch it, and walked him off to the edge of the clearing from which we could see the whole valley below. "Go on," I said, "we have some photographs to take!"

The incident was closed for the time being but I felt certain that we had not heard the last of it. (The two men glared at each other, like fighting dogs, for the rest of the expedition.)

We were soon pegging our little tent into the sodden ground, tightening the stays and settling down for the night. At nearly three thousand feet above sea-level it was very cold to anyone coming up from the plains. I was lost in admiration of our good Banerdjee, always so happy and contented, as he laboured to make himself useful, without having any idea how our various utensils functioned. In spite of warm clothing, woollen pullovers and rugs, we froze inside the tent. There was no hope of sleep! From time to time we went outside for a warm-up at the fires kept going by our escort. We could hear them singing all night.

On the sixth day of our expedition we reached our first Apa-Tani village. These quiet, well-organized villages form a compact enclave in the very heart of the Dafla country and are to be found at the bottom of scattered valleys, the altitude of the

valley floor being around 5,000 feet, whereas that of the surrounding forest-clad mountains is from 8,000 to 9,000.

The Apa-Tani population has been estimated to be 20,000. Their villages, strung out between Bela and Michi Bamin, account for 5,000, giving a density of 1,000 per square mile over their proportion of the valley area. Such a density is not exceeded elsewhere in Assam, but only in Bengal where the rich alluvial soil of the Ganges permits two rice harvests a year.

Before describing our meeting with the Apa-Tanis, it seems necessary to say something about their way of life in the heart of the great Asiatic massif and its fertile valleys where they make their home. They are an active and highly gifted people who have attained a high level of production thanks to a complicated agrarian system. Rice grows in fields which are irrigated by an ingenious system of many kilometres of small dykes. Millet, for which no irrigation is required, is grown on the higher ground. Fruit trees, gardens and lawns cover the rest of the cultivated area which is in private occupation.

The implements of the Apa-Tanis are of the most primitive description, being limited to the hoe. Neither draught animals nor ploughs are employed and yet not an inch of ground is untilled, agriculture being the foundation of their whole economy. The villages comprise compact and stable human groups; each house is occupied by a single family and the servants are lodged in an annexe. The concentration of Apa-Tani villages is readily explained by the necessity to protect the agricultural and sedentary community against attacks from warlike and nomadic neighbours.

This tribe is divided into two exogamous castes, the *mite* or patricians, and the *mura*, plebeians or slaves. Each of these castes is itself sub-divided into clans, each plebeian clan being the protégé of a patrician clan. Many slaves buy their freedom, but in the social organization of the tribe they are still regarded as descendants of slaves and will remain such even in "the land of the dead, where mura will stay mura in opposition to mite and will never mix with them".

The plebeian clans of the Apa-Tanis, who are very well treated by their mite, often become landowners. Their children, brought up in exactly the same way as their master's children, work together inside the *patang*, the communal house.

The villages are the reflection of this organization and its clan basis, each occupying a particular area with it's own religious centres. The Apa-Tanis have a very strong sense of tribal solidarity and the need to live in peace has induced them to contrive an extremely effective system of government.

As soon as our porters arrived in the village they sacrificed a chicken while we ourselves, after getting permission from a headman, pitched our tents a hundred and fifty metres from the nearest houses. It was a thrilling moment for us, and we had had a long time to wait for it! It seemed odd that, after seeing so much of so many tribes, we were not tired of going through the same old ritual and the familiar palaver. In fact, our weariness was purely physical and we forgot even that in contemplating the wonders of the new scene!

The light in these high altitudes—which is a thing apart—gave me a pleasant feeling that I was simply returning to some place I already knew and loved. The limpid glow of sunset on the peaks explained the origin of my sensations, memories of weeks spent in 1939 among the Lissous in the Himalayan Yunnan. Tibet was quite close even then!

Above our tents spread a protective canopy of tall slender bamboos. No leeches, mosquitoes, stinging flies or other winged torment! Near one hut a curious animal stared at us with a look of surprise—a white *mithan.*[1] Sri Banerdjee told me that mithans are plentiful among the Abors and Miris who value them highly. When the Daflas steal a mithan, the sole concern of the villagers is to get it back. "We Apa-Tanis," they say, "must ransom our animals; if they are left in Dafla hands, the spirits will be offended." Apa-Tani wealth is partly estimated by the number of mithans it comprises. These beasts figure in the sacrificial ceremonies and must never leave the villages. The artful Daflas are well versed in the ways of the Apa-Tanis and so the ransom they demand exceeds the animal's real value. It will be one or two pigs, a big bronze dish,[2] two lengths of finely embroidered cloth, a sword, and so forth, to which must be added the presents to intermediaries in the deal!

Mithans are not the only creatures to disappear; the men are often kidnapped as well. The ransom for a man captured by the Daflas can be as high as two mithan, four Tibetan bells, three pieces of cloth, three bronze dishes, three Apa-Tani swords, four axes, four hoes and salt. The clan must lose no time in recovering the prisoner by paying the ransom as otherwise he will become a Dafla slave, even if he is a patrician. What is equally serious is that the Apa-Tanis believe that if anyone stays too long among their fierce neighbours he will return with the evil eye, thus becoming a danger to their sacred community. The Daflas exploit this fear by making wholesale raids

[1] Wild ox (*bos frontalis*). The species does not seem to have crossed the Brahmaputra. We never came across it on the south bank.

[2] Imported from Tibet in days of old.

in the valleys from time to time. There is an Apa-Tani proverb: "Bare mountain tops and thieving for the Daflas, smiling valleys and honest toil for the Apa-Tanis."

There is an Apa-Tani legend that their people were born in a millet field. As there were not enough of them to till the soil, one of them, a noble of the Kago clan, one day ordered his millet seeds to turn into men and women. Since then the tribe has not lacked for numbers. Is there not something very charming in this legend, the idea of all these men tracing their origin to one furrow and a patient struggle with the forces of nature, man's first claim to glory?

Our hosts made a very attractive spectacle. Our interpreters told them that we were kindly folk from the plains, belonged to a rich clan and had come to listen to their songs and bring them presents in exchange for what they made themselves. So they treated us with a deference quite unusual among primitive people, who as a rule have no respect for social distinctions. Their approach seems to be governed solely by the degree of ease and dignity in the stranger's manner, an attitude met with only in feudal societies such as most of the great Tibetan tribes.

We took our first evening meal among them. We had got quite used to eating with our fingers like the natives and Sri Banerdjee was much amused, as he considers that Europeans find great difficulty in adapting themselves to that custom. Be that as it may, we did full justice to the semi-smoked quarters of boar or deer which, with rice, form the basis of the Apa-Tani menu.

The Apa-Tani women are not naturally ugly but disfigure themselves with consummate art. The little tattooed faces around me were as full of question marks for me as my face was for them. Bat-Héli had his hands full to answer all the queries from all quarters. The women thought my nose was not pretty. I can agree with them! But my nose is not adorned with a piece of charred wood forced up into each nostril and giving it a two centimetre diameter—greatly to the prejudice of their deliciously crooked little Mongol noses. The lobes of their ears, distended by polished bamboo rings, hang down to their shoulders. Their hair, smoothed back and coiled up in a round pad on top of the head, is extraordinarily comic. They remind me of the tousled, ill-kempt harridans whom Forain liked drawing about 1900. But that was not the worst! Bluish-black vertical lines tattooed on forehead and chin—like those I have seen on young Mikirs—spoil their beauty. But, of course, I am judging by our standards.

By contrast, the features of the men are primitive but not

without dignity and beauty and I have become used to their strange way of dressing the hair. It bears a strong resemblance to that of the tribes of Tibet, Lobos, Lissous and others, and I find it amusing. The hair is worn very long (I cannot imagine how they cut it), collected in a chignon above the forehead and coiled round a bamboo or ivory stick. Their heads are always covered by a skull cap of plaited rattan, decorated with cock or toucan feathers held in place by a sort of string of beads sown to the edge of the cap. From a bandoleer slung round the naked bodies of these hardy mountaineers hangs a deer or monkey skin pouch and a sword, which may be of vast size. Their loincloths, formed of some twenty very slender rattan stems plaited together and terminating in a tail hanging down between the buttocks, are as odd as the women's nose ornaments and always come as a surprise.

The night was far advanced when I heard our porters in a great state of excitement and got up to see what it was all about. While I had been asleep, a bloody brawl had broken out between the Apa-Tanis and one of our escorts. Bat-Héli rushed up to me to explain.

"Our Dafla's family captured a young patrician some time ago and took a big ransom to release him. He has been recognized and is being badly mauled. He is defending himself stoutly and now there's a fight to the death."

Settling accounts is a terrible business round here. Once the ransom is paid, the returning captive has the right, and even the duty, to take his revenge. A kind of vendetta thus starts between the Dafla and Apa-Tani families.

"But if it was so long ago, the whole thing should be forgotten."

"This kind of feud is never definitely ended," replied Bat-Héli, "even in Neli, 'the land of the dead'. Every time men of those families meet, swords jump out by themselves."

How comes it that this little human group, so well organized and apparently so law-abiding, can take to killing so easily?

Banerdjee, roused by the noise, made me sit with him by the big camp fire. A thick mist shrouded everything above and below us. We might have been seeing the village and its lights through a curtain. We could not take our eyes from the spot, a few metres away, where the fighting was going on. It seemed that nothing could stop it, though blood was flowing from heads and bespattering clothes.

"What will they do if someone gets killed?"

"If it's a Dafla his body will be carried to the borders where

his own people dwell. That's all! If it's an Apa-Tani, the Dafla concerned will be killed by the villagers round here and his body cut in pieces."

A charming prospect! Banerdjee knows all about the Apa-Tanis and their rigid customs. Bet-Héli had fires lit all round our camp and warned us to keep a sharp lookout. We might be in danger, so I woke Naz who was furious with me for disturbing his sleep. He did not think things could take a nasty turn.

"These fellows are mad," I said to my faithful and intelligent bearer.

"They are neither mad nor bad. It's simply a matter to be settled between ourselves," he replied, staring into the crackling fire, where every now and then a bamboo went off like a gun. Our escort was made up entirely of Daflas. . . . There was no point in telling me the story of the Galongs and the Tagins at that moment.

The shrieking from the village below continued in the fog. It was ghastly to think that men were killing each other so near us and we could do nothing to stop them. The villagers, who had respectfully crowded round us such a short time before, were now massed in a long frieze behind our camp, eyeing us in silence.

"You can never tell what they'll do next. They're just barbarians," said Sri Banerdjee, the Indian, without a tremor and quietly smoking his thin *billi*[1] cigarette.

"Who knows? They'll probably tell us to clear out at dawn."

Those who merely dream about travel in these latitudes cannot have the slightest idea of what it is like to spend a whole night on watch and longing for dawn to put an end to the tension. Banerdjee, to give me something else to think about, told me of a recent occurrence among the Apa-Tanis. A man who had been captured by enemies from another village escaped after three months' captivity. A few days later he returned to the house of his captor and hid nearby. When a woman came out and went to the paddy barn, he followed her, killed her and cut off one of her hands. He then returned to his village and deposited the hand in the sanctuary, the *nago*, where it remained for three days. Religious rites were performed during the three nights and the priest of the clan, assisted by a communal servant from the village, offered sacrifice. There was dancing every night and the sorcerers summoned the spirits of the deceased and the dead and living members of her family to come and share the food and drink which had been laid out for them on the nago. At the third dawn, the hand, coated with

[1] A kind of Indian cheroot.

pig's lard, was thrown into a blazing fire where it disappeared for ever.[1]

This rite is called *ropi*. In many cases only the hand is brought back, but in principle the enemy's eyes and tongue must be placed in a bamboo stalk and buried. In this way the powers of avenging spirits who might return to deal with the murderer are buried deep down in the earth.

After a time the shouting and sounds of fighting died down and we waited in silence, guessing rather than seeing that the ring of villagers had been drawn closer. We could hear them spitting and belching, and several coughed. One man came forward to sit by Bat-Héli, who had resumed smoking his pipe and was calmly puffing clouds of smoke from his coarse, strong-smelling tobacco. From the back of the ring around us came low murmurs, long-drawn-out lamentations in syllables like *maam-maa-mm* and *ayayay-ay*.

An Apa-Tani, the priest, came and sat down by us. He had a panther skin slung over his shoulders with the tail hanging down and sweeping the ground. Banerdjee shot a glance at me which meant: "A sacrifice is beginning; our porter has been killed. What about ourselves?"

Then the priest said something to Bat-Héli which the good fellow translated as follows:

"I am their friend and you are their friends, but it is forbidden to have strangers in the village during the *ropi* sacrifice. We Daflas of your escort must leave and take the body of our brother as far away as possible. You yourselves can stay behind and they will find you porters to take you back in a few days' time, when the ceremonies are over; but until then you must not leave your camp."

I asked my companions to think it over and said I did not want an immediate answer, adding that it would be a great pity to leave the Apa-Tani village so soon, especially as we were not being ordered off, though obviously we must send away our Dafla porters at once.

Bat-Héli seemed lost in gloom.

"Who will look after you when I and my men have gone? And who will translate what these people want to say?"

Who indeed!

Banerdjee said nothing and Naz was convinced that it would be better for us to return. But all my fears had taken wing since we had been told that we could stay if we wanted. I did not believe that they could bring themselves to kill us, and anyhow they had seen our rifles. They were well aware what a gun could

[1] The Konyak Nagas do the same with the heads they cut off.

do as we had given them a demonstration of marksmanship when we first arrived.

"I don't want to go now," I said. "I have a plan."

I gave Bat-Héli some money and food and advised him to await us three days' march away and fix up a camp with the porters. If we did not turn up in the next five or six days he was to send one of his men to Dulangmukh for help and come back in force to look for us.

My decision did not recommend itself to Bat-Héli, but when a pale dawn was beginning to filter through the mist, accompanied by soft rain (the first we had had for months), our escort, whom alone we could trust, filed off, bearing a battered corpse.

It took us a little time to size up the situation after their departure. Not one of the Apa-Tanis could speak any language which any of us knew. The sun was already blazing above the majestic, silent mountains when the dancing began—curious dances which we dared not photograph. The men passed in Indian file before the altar, facing each other in pairs and simulating mortal combat, while never abandoning the dance rhythm. Two Apa-Tanis came and sat down by us with a set expression and eyes half closed. Without seeming to do so, they closely followed our every movement and hung on our words as if they understood them. We plied each other with questions:

"Can you see anything on the nago?"

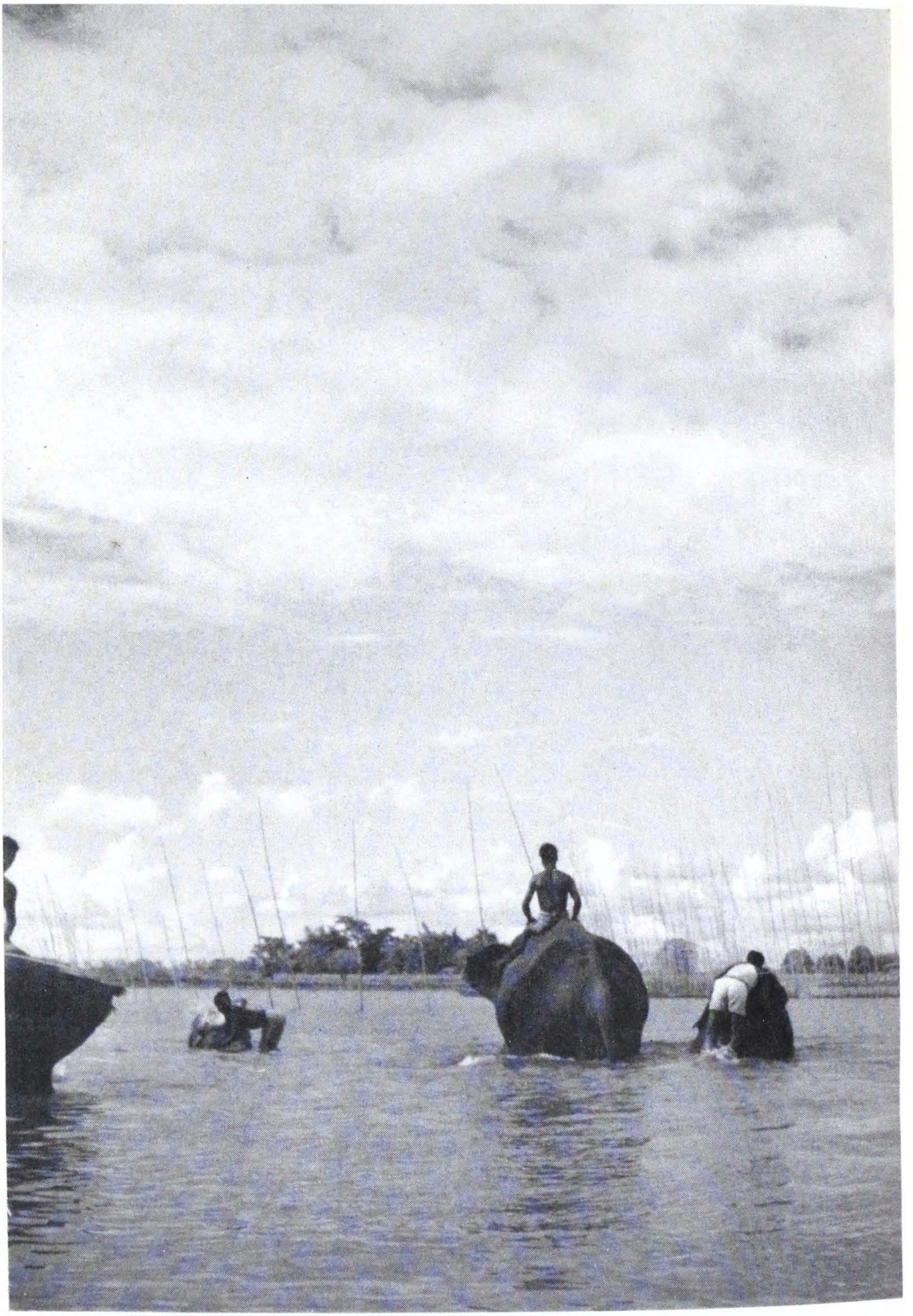
"What will they do when their dance is over?"

Banerdjee remained quite unperturbed. He was as confident as we ourselves that we should not come to any harm. He told us of another personal experience.

"One day a sick Apa-Tani from one of these villages came down to the plantation to ask me for some medicine. As both the doctor and his attendant were away I broke open the medicine chest and gave him some quinine. These people from high altitudes go down with malaria the moment they get into five or six hundred metre jungle country. To make a long story short, a few days later the man's brother turned up, sword in hand. I thought my last hour had come, as meanwhile I had learned from the assistant that the bottle had actually contained a powerful narcotic! My unfortunate patient should have died from the effects of what I thought was quinine. The Apa-Tanis made me leave my office in front of all my servants at the point of his sword. At that moment I caught sight of the body of my victim lying under some tea bushes with a dozen of his compatriots crowding round. It was a nasty moment, I can tell you! When I got up close I realized at once that he was not

Arrival of the Expedition's car on the beach at Kursela—a risky disembarkation

Camp at Tulchidjora. Jean Naz, Prince Amahl Barua, and the author, with Boro people in the background



The elephants' bath

dead. I told my servants to bring out the medicine chest and then and there injected oil of camphor to keep the heart going. We never left the patient's bedside all night while the Apa-Tanis mounted guard over us. Next morning the man woke up, pretty fuddled but otherwise as right as rain. He belongs to a patrician clan of this village and speaks a little Assamese. I think they'll bring him along to look after us. Everyone knows me here as 'the man who restores life to the blood of the dead'."

"I imagine that may be very useful," I said, "but suppose an Apa-Tani had been killed tonight instead of a Dafla, and you'd been asked to bring him back to life!"

In the village, the dancing round the funeral pyre never let up, the men leaping wildly, thrusting out their chests and clapping their hands to mark time. Chignons came apart and long hair streamed out behind. The tam-tam artistes joined in and others beat gongs, tuned in thirds like a carillon. The noise was absolutely deafening and the proceedings reached a frenzied climax such as I have never seen before except in the orgiastic ceremonies of a buffalo sacrifice among the Moï of Indochina.

It will have been realized that Apa-Tani customs are not exactly refined. Thieves are subjected to the harsh penalty of amputation of "the hand that has stolen a brother's goods". Criminals are put to death and the humiliation of the ropi is inflicted on the corpses. The victim is hacked to pieces, which are then thrown into the river. A deceived husband takes the matter very seriously; he slays the lover, chops his body into little pieces, has them cooked and compels the guilty wife to eat them. The wife is not thrown out, but suffers consistent ill treatment, especially if she belongs to a patrician clan and her lover is a slave.

On the other hand, there is little restraint in pre-marital sexual relations and they never involve scandal or recrimination.

Speaking generally, young girls get their sexual initiation long before maturity. A girl can spend several nights with a young man without anyone taking any notice. Handsome plebeian athletes are often most welcome to patrician girls. It never seems to occur to them that a child might be born of such casual associations; they only laugh if the possibility is mentioned. They think that it is only after a couple have lived together for a considerable time that sexual intercourse can result in a birth. This is not very surprising as there are few illegitimate children among the Apa-Tanis, probably because the favourite time for these irregular relations is when conception is unlikely.

But once a marriage is consummated the position is completely changed. Haimendorf goes so far as to say that this premarital licence is one of the main reasons why marriages are so stable, divorce being an exceptional occurrence among the Apa-Tanis and adultery even more so. But I am not so sure about that. I suspect that the prospect of ending up in a stew-pot is not exactly inviting!

When a child is born before marriage, it is called *bipa*, and to some extent is kept apart, even though always adopted by the mother's clan. In some clans the child is not allowed to be present at many of the religious ceremonies or ritual feasts. Very often these bipa never marry. They emigrate to other villages and hire themselves out as agricultural labourers. In these days many of them come down to villages on the Inner-Line, leave their legendary home valleys for good, and make a living as bearers between the plains and the hills, a profitable occupation, as regular two-way traffic has now begun. By and large, this solution of the problem suits everyone, as Apa-Tanis of the patrician classes never carry anything themselves; they have always left that job to the mura.

Marriage, which the Apa-Tanis consider a sacred and permanent institution, does not end with death. The spouses will continue to live together in Heli, "the land of the dead", and even if a widow remarries several times her second and third marriages do not count in the next world; she will rejoin her first husband.

The man must pay a dowry to obtain a girl. She may be worth anything from one to five mithans. Her parents offer him jewels and kitchen utensils but these are really presents. The young man's father provides a house which they build together, quite frequently only after the marriage. Meanwhile the young couple are welcome to live with one or other of the in-laws.

The patang system of the Apa-Tanis is similar to the Garo bara, but of wider scope. In the patang, which is both a system of collective labour and a mixed club, young people of both sexes work happily side by side. A very rich patrician can hire a whole patang to help him at harvest time. He pays a sum of money which is divided among all the members of the organization. This is in fact the only case in which villagers are paid for their labour otherwise than in rice, millet or spirits. They also get lengths of cloth for the girls, swords or daggers for the men.

On the mountain crests all round our little camp dusk descended, a blend of golden light and fiery red from dense columns of smoke. Outlying villages must have been notified that something special was going on in these parts and these

fires were a signal that the inhabitants were on their way. We were told they were coming to join us but would stop somewhere for the night. The tam-tams and gongs maintained their rhythm, very trying to the nerves, though by now we were quite used to their penetrating din.

While the Apa-Tanis were still engrossed in their macabre convolutions the sun had completed its round and night had fallen. Once again we were shrouded in darkness, though the mist was less dense than on the previous evening. Down in the village which was the home of our odd friends the last embers of a bonfire were dissolving into ash. But the hand of the man who had helped me to struggle up those wild slopes had not yet been consumed and the priests were keeping up their interminable litanies and the dancers still careering round the nago.

We were served with cooked meats and millet beer mixed with powdered charcoal—a rather disagreeable drink, syrupy and heady, but an excellent remedy for intestinal disorders, much like Belloc's charcoal treatment.

Yet despite all these attentions, which are normal hospitality among this primitive people, we could not rid ourselves of the vague feeling of apprehension inspired by the fires on the hill tops and the guttural remarks passing between the natives here and the villagers camping under the darkly dramatic sky. Our guardians, peering steadily through half-closed eyes, never relaxed their watchful attitude for a moment.

Darkness revived the intangible menace and subtle discomfort of the previous night. Towards midnight I threw myself on my camp bed, drunk with sleep and the maddening beat of the tam-tams.

In the fresh morning air a gong was heard and the sound travelled over the dew-bespangled ground and was echoed from the mountain walls around. I awoke shivering and rushed outside. Naz and Banerdjee were swinging their arms to warm up. They looked green after a second night on guard. I felt apologetic for my decision not to return with the Dafla porters.

"If we are chopped up and cooked in spices for tonight's supper it will be your fault," said Jean. "Reinforcements arrived at dawn this morning, at least thirty very tough and unpleasant looking customers."

I could not help laughing at the worried faces of my colleagues and remarked somewhat cynically:

"You mean to say you haven't had any sleep?"

It brought them up sharp and no one answered. I myself felt

lots better as my sleep had completely restored me and I was all for going to see what was happening in the village.

The gong was still sounding.

"Wait a bit," said Banerdjee. "The dances have ended and our guards went off a little while ago, yet they're keeping it going even after the ropi ceremony. We shall soon know what they're up to."

An hour later the man whom Banerdjee had "resurrected" turned up, accompanied by a considerable number of individuals suffering from various ailments such as coughs and mild skin diseases.

"I lost my soul," he said. "For many days the priests tried to bring it back but it did not return. But you came to my aid; my soul has never left me since."

Many of these Apa-Tanis were also suffering from malaria so we gave them quinacrin tablets, devoutly hoping that their souls would never leave them! In exchange they gave us basket ware and cotton stuffs embroidered by themselves.

Five days later Bat-Héli returned with a worried air, bringing with him a few of his Apa-Tani friends who have made their homes the last two or three years in a little village north-east of North Lakhimpur. Accompanied by them and our new friends, we continued our exploration of the surrounding villages without further trouble.

We spent three weeks in that way and then bade farewell to the mountains and returned to the Dulang villages feeling as if we were coming back home.

PART V

TULCHIDJORA DHÛRA HUNTING CAMP

The beasts are very wise,
Their mouths are clean of lies. . . .
Kipling.

May 1954.

At the end of May we got to Darranga at last. It lies on the river of the same name, on the Bhutan frontier. After leaving Ananda Tea Estate the roads were non-existent and what with mechanical problems, breakdowns and getting bogged in swamps, we spent many a night under the stars. To add to our troubles the "little monsoon" started, we began to have serious misgivings and everyone advised us to find a sure place of refuge before the great rains came. For the last hundred kilometres we had been travelling in torrid heat, through wonderful mountain scenery, rugged yet green—that velvety tropical green. Huge trees, wreathed in creepers, overhung the spongy trail.

There is nothing more barren and poverty-stricken than the god-forsaken hole called Darranga. Its hovels, some of bamboo and others of wood roofed with corrugated iron, are the product of the local squalor.

In our notes on the district the name of the village is followed by the words "annual fairs", but these were over long before our arrival. They are frequented by many Bhutanis and Tibetans in January and February, the dry season coinciding with the Buddhist festivals which have been celebrated since the seventeenth century in the temple of Hajo, seven miles north of Gauhati, on the first day of the month of Magh in the Bengali calendar. We were now on the threshold of the mysterious country of Bhutan in which, so far as I know, only two or three Europeans[1] have ever set foot.

Here we were but a few kilometres from Dewangiri, the

[1] See *National Geographic Magazine*, Washington, December 1952, "Bhutan, land of the Thunder Dragon", by Burt Keer Todd.

first Bhutani *dzong*, over which hangs a human mystery very different from that presented by the primitive tribes—not to mention another sort of terror which has held back so many travellers at the approach to this eagle's nest.

Our own adventure is drawing to a close, for this year at least, as the monsoon will soon make movement impossible. Human activity is slowing down. The clammy heat becomes unbearable and gradually saps the virility of the workers. We must get on Goalpara as quickly as possible.

At Tamulpur, where we resumed contact with civilization in the shape of a post-office, we found letters from Amahl Chandra Barua to whom we had written from North Lakhimpur, as we passed through on our way down from the Apa-Tani country. We learned that the great wild elephant hunt was about to conclude at Tulchidjora on the banks of the river Kanamakra, and that we were expected. We pushed on without delay, but progress in the Goalpara direction was held up by storms at night which caused a considerable rise in the level of the many-armed rivers. Using the ferries became a very tricky business. We knew where to start but no one could say exactly where we would land on the other side.

Fortunately for us, Sunyl, the new bearer we had picked up en route, was a very bright Assamese. He had more than once got us out of awkward predicaments and when we stopped at Tamulpur had recruited two helpers whom he kept going by winks and signs without our having to bother about them. We were now a party of five and I soon realized that with Naz and myself almost dropping with fatigue they were far from superfluous.

Our crossing of the Manas had to be carried out in stages. Our truck was too heavy and had to be unloaded before embarkation. Then we had to make several crossings against a fierce current, night fell before we had finished and the ferrymen refused to take our last load across. We were forced to establish some sort of camp with the truck and the bulk of our gear while Sunyl and the rearguard stayed on the other side in the little village of Kahitana, so that he was geographically placed between two huge arms of the Manas.

At dawn, nothing was to be seen! A sudden rise had swept away everything—part of the village, the camp, the servants' hut and two tin cases, one of them containing some exposed films and all the unused film we had left. Sunyl himself had been badly hurt by a floating tree. When he was roused by the rising waters in the middle of the night he had dived into the

torrent several times in an effort to salvage what he considered most indispensable—the cooking-stove and the food!

Amahl Chandra Barua came looking for us in the depths of the bush on the banks of the Aï where the Boro tribes live. His brother's hunting camp was at Tulchidjora, six miles away. We were ten or twelve miles past Bongaïgaon, the last village this side of the jungle, and had once more abandoned the road in favour of a muddy trail. We wondered how we should find our way back!

Rajkumar Prakritish Barua had to send elephants to help us in crossing the river. While waiting for their arrival we told our friend all about our adventures among the Apa-Tanis. He was lost in astonishment as he is an Assamese of Goalpara and was quite unaware of the existence of such people. Once again, as at Gauripur when we arrived from the Ganges nine months ago, he impressed on us the need for a holiday. This time he was not to be denied; we had to stop. I may say I quite agreed with him!

Jean got the truck ready for the crossing and took soundings. The water was so deep that we had to remove the batteries and apply a coating of grease to protect the vulnerable parts of the engine. The elephants arrived at the moment when the changing colours in the sky were promising a swift and ominous sunset.

A thick rope used in elephant hunts was fastened to the tow-bar and when Amahl held out the other end to one of these wonderful beasts it seized it in its trunk, coiled it neatly round one of its tusks, grasped it in its mouth and bit hard to prevent slipping.

Taking up the slack, the animal pulled away, apparently without the slightest effort, taking our truck and its load with it. The water foamed all round us and we soon realized that we should never have got across by ourselves in the swift current. In the middle of the river the bottom was very bumpy and the elephant began to labour. Amahl, who was on another elephant behind us, made it push us with its trunk and in this way we gained the far bank without further difficulty.

After six miles of dense jungle and featureless savannah we arrived at the banks of the Kanamakra where Barua had his camp. We could see fires and the bright moonlight showed up the shadows of the *pal.*[1] Various people came out to meet us,

[1] A local word for the huts of wood or bamboo and foliage which the huntsmen build as accommodation for the duration of the hunt.

among them the prince, quietly dressed in longhi and shirt. The glow from the brazier played upon his noble face, bringing out the characteristic Mongol features, and his frank, smiling eyes revealed his pleasure at meeting us, casual strangers though we were.

"This is real jungle; there's not much in the way of modern comfort," he said.

We laughed uproariously. "Amahl can't have told you much about us."

"Oh yes he has! We all know that you are real *jungli*!"

The prince called up his servants and told them to help us erect our big tent alongside his own leafy hut.

"Peg it down well," Lalgi (as he is called by all his friends) counselled, "as we get violent storms every night and everything gets carried away. And don't forget to lash the canvas firmly."

He helped Jean to drive a second row of bamboo pegs deep into the soft soil and parallel to the longer sides of the tent. Then they fastened a rope from the ridge to each stake. Tight-hauled in this way, our dear old canvas house gives less purchase to the wind; the pressure is against the ropes rather than the canvas and there is less risk of its being carried up like a balloon if the wind gets under the double roof.

When the job had been finished, we slipped into our woollen suits, as it was rather cold, and went off for refreshment under the prince's great pal where a generous dinner awaited us—curried deer, roast pheasant and tasty *doi*.[1]

The whole family was assembled. Lalgi's wife, Bina, who is a Khasi and daughter of the siem of Shillong, has a pretty and most expressive face. The parents, brothers and first cousins draped themselves in their capacious, bright-hued Assamese tchadour with gestures of classical grace. Peacocks, monkeys, dogs, cats and pigeons came as close to the fire as they dared. This camp in the heart of virgin forest called to mind pictures from the Ramayana[2] epic. Lalgi and Bina were Rama and Sita, surrounded by their followers, living in the jungle "where wild beasts frolic without vanity and all the muddy pools with their crocodiles are not even accessible to elephants on heat; where creeper and thorns encumber the paths where the wild cock sings . . . and man sleeps in a verdant palace, his body lax with very joy".

For seven months of the year the Baruas, living at the leisurely pace of a nomad aristocracy heedless of anything save the trivia of daily life, keep well away from their palace at Gauripur,

[1] A white cheese made from buffalo milk.

[2] A Hindu legend, with religious text attributed to the poet Valmiki.

which is their home for the rainy season alone. Here they live only for hunting, the aristocracy's special preserve, the life of the jungle, the tending of the herds—all in the patriarchal atmosphere of a simple country life. One seems to be swimming against the current, flying in the teeth of history, divorced from one's day and age.

The folk around us wore happy smiles that seemed to expose the hollowness of accepted beliefs. They make fine figures at a moment when India, free but exhausted, seems to have no aim beyond a return to the India of legend so as to recover her soul in her noble sons. Lalgi and his people are the legend in person; they are its living incarnation and devoutly believe in it.

When I woke next morning, I went outside to admire the landscape bathed in a roseate dawn. The camp, a little world to itself, lacked for nothing. It was the moment when fires were being revived for early tea. The buffaloes were being rounded up and driven to pasture and the mahouts were already busy with their elephants. I could only see about ten, but it seems that there were thirty of them, all trained for hunting, besides a few little wild elephants recently captured and still undergoing training in the *fandi*[1] camps. An hour later they would be led to the river and their hides carefully rubbed down with tufts of tender grass. Overhead a flight of noisy Brahmin duck[2] swept over the Kanamakra. The river's intricate windings sparkled in the early morning light, disclosing innumerable islands smothered in bush and high grass. Where the jungle ended on the pale blue horizon lay Bhutan, once more quite close, well guarded by its human beasts of prey.

An idle morning offered all sorts of attractions. After our frugal breakfast, a crowd of Boros came to inspect our tent; its orange canvas must have been visible from far away. Orange is the colour of their wives' garments, though the beautiful designs with which they are embroidered are of various hues. These people had never seen a house like ours and we found ourselves the centre of attraction to a mob which had come from miles around to wonder at our camp. I rather suspected that the unending queue might be a nuisance to our friends, but was quickly reassured.

"They never bother us. We spend half the year among them. They're our country and our people. Tiger abounds at this time of the year, just after the elephant hunts, and the more

[1] From the Assamese word *fand*, rope or lasso; "fandi" are the men who use it.

[2] *Casarca rutila.*

villagers turn up the more we learn about where the beasts are hiding."

An old woman who was moaning at Lalgi's feet attracted my attention. She was asking for a little rice because the paddy barns were empty and the winter harvests had not been good. The wind-blown rains had also been inadequate and drought that year had become a plague. There was nothing but mud in the bottom of the few local wells and the villagers were having to fetch water from the Kanamakra, which is not near enough to some of the villages.

The Kanamakra is a sacred river to the Boros, as are all streams coming down from the Himalayan foothills, the home of that divine pair who are Mother Earth and Father Sky.[1] When the wells dry up and the fields begin to turn brown each year, sacrifices are offered to the god of the rains, Houtoum, incarnated in the rivers.

The old woman had come to implore Lalgi to offer a kid to the god. She herself was too poor.

"Perhaps the voice of the Great Chief will be easier to hear than mine," she said. "A black kid must be offered to the Kanamakra."

"Come back tomorrow," said the prince. "We will sacrifice to bring rain."

The old woman went off, muttering words of thanks and praise which embraced us all. Here as elsewhere, water is the vital necessity of life and rain alone can produce it. Lalgi told me that the natives attribute drought to a very simple cause—the Earth Goddess has been deserted by her lover, Houtoum, god of the clouds. They must plead with him and do everything in their power to revive his love. In this connection there is a curious tradition, which is perpetuated year after year. Women, and women alone, naked and far from prying eyes, perform a dance at night by the banks of some remote stream. It is accompanied by lascivious love-songs and a wealth of highly suggestive gestures. Houtoum's divine organism readily responds to the subtle influences emanating from the bodies of these ecstatic wood nymphs and his passion for the earth goddess returns. The ceremony includes many chants of high magical powers. Rain should follow immediately.

Houtoum is a god of supreme importance in the Goalpara country and very many villages boast a special category of female magicians whose function is to make sure that the celestial downpours shall occur at the times when they are wanted.

[1] Here again the worship of the earth survives, thanks to the Mongoloid element; she is the former Etugen of the Mongols.

"We will sacrifice a black goat tomorrow," said Lalgi. "The animal's colour is part of the charm. Everything black darkens the sky with rain clouds. In central India where I go to hunt deer, they occasionally sacrifice a black buffalo or burn its entrails. The black smoke from the fire is collected on leafy branches and paraded from door to door in the villages to the strains of a hymn:

Send us, O god of the clouds,
Quickly send us thy treasure of water
And ripen the rice in our fields!

A rest at last, after all our exertions! No more worries or preoccupations! Food was ready the moment we felt hungry and such things as itineraries and time-tables were forgotten. We could sleep peacefully at night because there was a strong guard keeping watch round the camp fires. Even if a tiger came prowling near the pal we should have nothing to fear. I felt quite limp, mentally and physically, after all the months of tension and was glad of a week's rest before turning out for a big elephant hunt.

But though I did not join the hunters at once I could use the interval to make myself at home in the camp. I gradually got the hang of things, picking up the significance of various actions or objects such as the isolated tree under which the *mates* and *kamlas*[1] break in newly captured elephants to the strains of ballads about the winds in the jungles, grassy plains and long-lost *bhita*.[2]

We have caught thee, little elephant,
With us thou shalt live
Like a brother.
We will teach thee the life of the camp;
With us thou shalt fare well.
Thou shalt be our only care,
Dearer to us than our own loves . . .
With us thou shalt roam the jungle,
The jungle filled with the songs of birds and insects;
Under the starry sky thou shalt sleep at our side
In our dhûra.[3]

It was a delightful piece of improvised recitative, sung to a handful of notes, about the mahouts' life in the pastures and the

[1] The mahout's first and second assistants.
[2] The sites of ancient villages, now abandoned and returned to jungle.
[3] Hunting camp (Assamese).

chase and their grief on leaving their homes and loves for long months in the elephant camps.

The fandi's job is very strenuous and governed by strict rules. At the beginning of the dry season, towards the end of September, all the leading fandi have to assemble at Shillong to have the boundaries of their "territories" and appropriate quotas fixed, having regard to the whereabouts and presumed number of wild elephants. If the fandi break any of these rules they lose their licences. It is a serious crime to enter anyone else's "territory", exceed one's quota or kill an elephant.

Catching elephants requires several camps, a big base, sited like ours on a river bank in close proximity to a forest, and several small advance camps in the heart of the jungle where the hunt servants and beaters are accommodated. Assam is the only part of India where wild elephants are captured by lasso, with the help of specially trained domestic elephants. There are two men to each elephant, the fandi who actually throws the lasso and the mahout who usually sits astride the animal's neck but exchanges places with the man behind him during the hunt itself.

The harness of a hunting elephant is reduced to a minimum, a crupper along its back and a vast chest-band to which the lasso, a jute rope six to eight metres long and as thick as a man's wrist, is secured.

One nice bright morning a herd was signalled. I saw Barua ordering up his mount and the fandi busy with a number of elephants which seemed to be "spares". While spying on all their comings and goings from behind my mosquito net I was suddenly thrilled to hear myself addressed:

"Good morning, mem-sahib! Do you feel strong enough to join us today?"

I jumped out of bed as if I had just been attacked by a swarm of red ants! What a bit of luck! Lalgi was ready to take me with him and I was being offered one of the most exciting experiences in life. Of course it is not exactly heroic to join up with the rearguard. One only sees the game from a back seat. But what a spectacle!

Amahl and I mounted Devi-Singh, a female elephant, while the fandi climbed on to their beasts and we all started off for the advance camps. Our supporting party comprised ten elephants, each carrying two or three men armed with long pikes and guns loaded with blank cartridges to scare wild elephants if the need arose.

The laws of elephant catching prescribe that a fandi must not kill an elephant, even if he is in danger, and the men who choose this life know very well what is involved. But if the wild elephants hunted are spared, it is not always the same with the domestic ones and the hunters.

I had heard plenty of tales to that effect, one in particular about a female which managed to bite through the lasso holding her baby prisoner despite the beating the fandi gave her with his dao. On another occasion, one of the finest hunting elephants was savaged and ripped open by a furious and gigantic opponent which stayed for two days trampling on the carcass under the terrified gaze of the mahout and fandi who had sought safety by climbing a tree.

In Indian file our ponderous procession threaded its way through the jungle, a maze of vivid green still wreathed in thin morning mist. An hour after leaving our dhûra we caught sight of the beaters gathered round the leafy huts forming the hunters' camp. The hunters themselves were further ahead, quite close to the pastures favoured by the wild elephants.

The setting was breath-taking and well worthy of them! Here the Kanamakra suddenly emerges from the forest and waters a vast triangle of meadow where the herd was feeding. There were beasts of all ages, enormous males with their leader, a mighty veteran, fount of wisdom and experience, and many females anxiously mounting guard over their young.

Amahl pointed to the scene and gave me a dazzling smile as if he were showing me his hidden treasures. I could only hold my breath, deeply moved by such a lovely picture of one of nature's pastorals.

Two or three hundred metres away two of our elephants picked their way through the brush. Kneeling on the crupper, the mahout guided his mount with his ankus, while the fandi crouched at the ready, a lasso coiled on his thighs, with the noose end thrown over the right shoulder. Not a word passed between the two men, the fandi directing the operation by signs alone. The herd had to be approached upwind, because elephants have an acute sense of smell and become nervous and suspicious if they scent human beings.

My companion explained the technique of the business. The first fandi picks out the animal he selects for capture. It must not be less than five nor more than fifteen years old; at fifteen an elephant is almost adult and it is too risky to lasso too powerful a beast, which may well attack one of the domestic animals.

The mahout was very careful in his handling of his enormous

pachyderm. He approached his quarry from behind and sidled up on its right side. The fandi's job was then quite simple and success depended on his presence of mind, agility and skill with the lasso. Pivoting on his hips, he threw the rope with both hands in such a way that the noose encircled the elephant's head. The running knot stayed on the neck while the rest slipped over the forehead and trunk. The elephant, feeling something unusual tickling its trunk, rolled it up and the lasso fell down over its chest. That was the moment for the fandi to draw the noose tight round its neck. He took up the slack with the speed of lightning and secured the rope tightly to the belt of his mount so that the captive could not get purchase either to charge or bolt. Up to that moment the operation had proceeded in silence, a silence as profound as nature's breathless hush all round us. The slightest unusual sound could be detected by the scouts of the herd and a dangerous stampede would immediately follow. Every man had to have his job at his finger tips and be ready to act on the spur of the moment, whatever the dangers and difficulties might be.

A prolonged, agitated trumpeting suddenly made me start. The young elephant had realized it was trapped and was calling to its fellows. At the same moment all our men, including those round me, began to yell at the tops of their voices. Surprised by the sudden din, the wild elephants, still peacefully feeding in blissful ignorance of the drama in progress behind their backs, raised their trunks, sniffed, listened with ears thrust forward and bolted into the depths of the forest.

It may well happen at such a moment that a mother turns round and comes to the rescue of her baby or a big bull sometimes charges, in which eventuality the hunters' lives hang by a thread; their only chance of safety lies in the rescue party (to which we were attached).

But on this occasion all went well and the captive was brought along, tightly held on the leash and jammed between two elephants. He was quickly conductd to the shelter of some trees in an *ad hoc* clearing near the fandi's huts. Amahl and I followed. The poor creature was quite small and I found myself gripped by remorse. . . . Had I seen anything more than the triumph of low cunning?

The advance camp was the captive's home for the first two days. Settling him in was a cruel business. He was firmly tethered by the legs to two stakes driven deep into the ground and with the help of a tame elephant the ropes round his ankles were pulled tight in such a way that his forelegs were in front of, and his hind legs behind, what would have been his

natural stance. In this way, he was unable to pull in any direction. He could lie on his side, though he seldom did so, so great was his terror at finding himself spirited away to a new world far away from his own kind. He began to moan and weep real tears for hours at a time. There was a note of genuine pathos in his voice and he kept his great ears erect—always a sign of fright. He was kept in this uncomfortable posture under the watchful eye of two keepers without food or water for forty-eight hours. On the morning of the third day a mahout brought him a bucket of water and some tit-bits, notably sugar cane. That day began the first part of the training, which means no more than getting the animal used to human voices and hands and the sight of fire. The mahouts and their assistants fussed over him, stroking and patting his hide while one of them improvised ditties which the others took up in chorus. The real training started five or six days later when the elephant stopped crying and was taken to the big camp. From then on the captive's voice changed; the tone of despair was heard no longer. He grew accustomed to his new life and man won his affection. He became and remained man's friend.

While we were strolling in the men's pal and among the tethered elephants in the dhûra, and Lalgi and Amahl were telling me all about their experiences, my thoughts were busy with the wonderful sort of life they lead. I felt I was seeing deep down into their inner being, which must surely harmonize with the great solitudes and age-old valleys in which nothing seems on a natural scale!

"Being a wild elephant hunter is a grand occupation, though in India it is considered the lowest of professions. You don't have to cheat," said Lalgi with a smile.

Elephants, even after taming, are regarded with a certain amount of awe. It is with the utmost respect that they are captured, trained and saluted by their keepers when they die.

My magic moment, the "promised land" of all emotions of these faraway events, came that evening when the mahouts were filling the night air with romantic ballads of the chase while we sat round log-fires and grilled fresh venison.

These days tigers are a favourite subject of conversation in the prince's pal at night. This time of year, just before the monsoon, is the best for big game hunting. I have been a ready listener, stretched out on cushions and inhaling the soft, sweet fumes from the water-pipes stoked with a blend of tobacco and hashish—a heady mixture, despite a light breeze blowing through the hut and bringing us the scent of sap and soil.

A tiger had been seen by villagers some three miles north of our camp. It had killed a cow and then been put to flight by the terrified yells of the peasants.

"Not much chance for us tomorrow," said Lalgi. "The brute must be a long way away by now. It is no use telling them to make no noise; they just can't help it."

It is quite true that the Boros, like the Garos, Nagas and other tribes, are reluctant to reveal the presence of a tiger. All the natives hereabouts believe that the animal's spirit will return for revenge. If it is a man-eater their superstitious panic is even greater. The sorcerer, *bhangaria* in the Goalpara country, invokes a man-eating tiger when visiting the sick, thus keeping a hold on this individualist jungle world which knows no law save its ancient beliefs and the bonds of custom.

There were plenty of reports about our tiger that night. It was well-known in the district as it had claimed twenty-three victims in seven weeks. The villages were terrorized. . . . Two or three years ago this tiger had its hunting ground in the vicinity of the Kanamakṛa and its tributaries, but up to then it had maintained a good neighbour policy with the peasants. It had hunted boars and deer without leaving the thickets and ravines in the part of the jungle which it made its own in many a mortal combat with rivals. Last winter it had had a duel with one of them over a tigress. A villager had heard their growling late at night. A few weeks later the animal had turned up on the outskirts of a wood bordering the pasture ground and had carried off a buffalo.

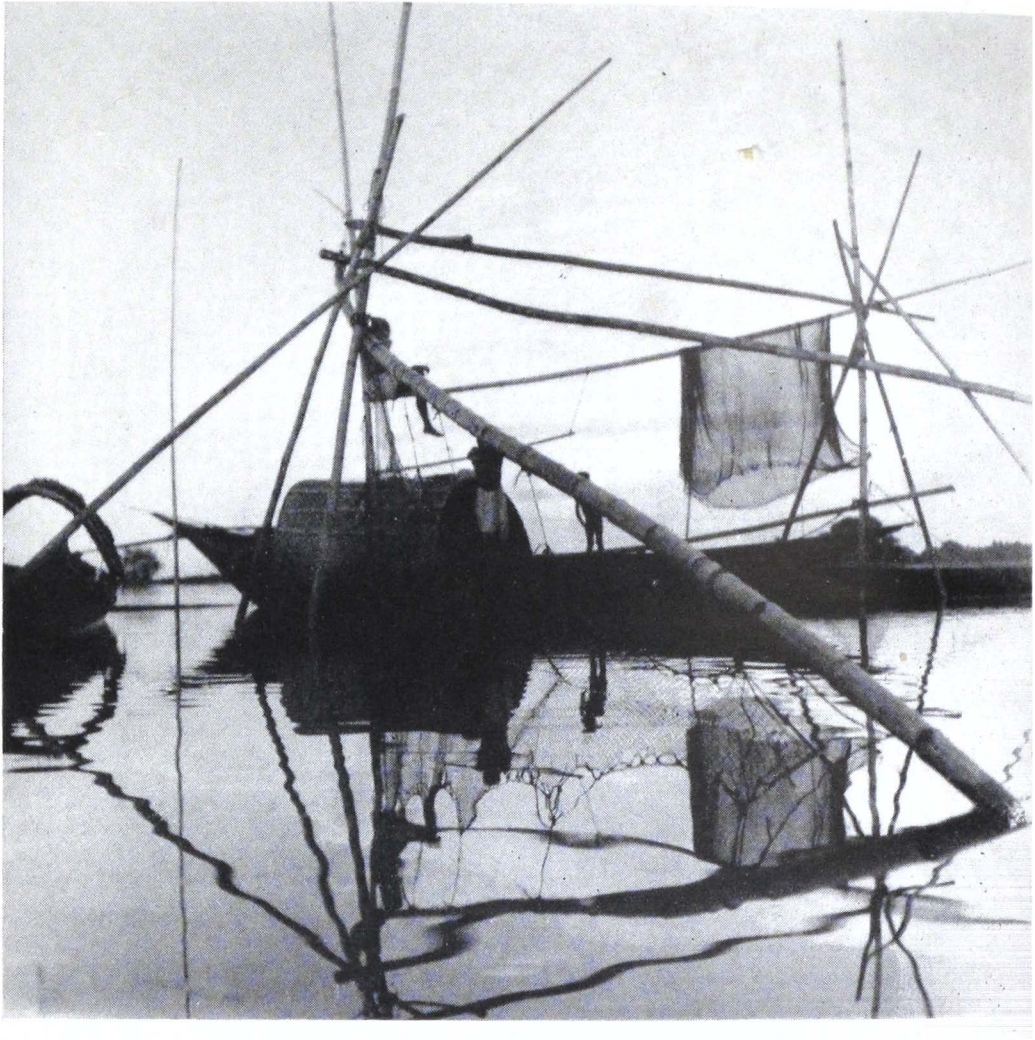
This tiger had one peculiarity. The herdsmen who had seen it called it Ling'rah because it limped and the elders said that it must have been injured in the fight with its rival. Its stiff paw, paralysed by a severed nerve no doubt, made it impossible to jump and charge at top speed. Without the necessary agility it was now restricted to easy prey.

"It must be in its prime," Lalgi continued, "and doubly dangerous because it knows all about men. Some day it will lose its temper when it hears them shouting. There are two explanations for a tiger's behaviour—hunger and fear. When it's in a rage it will go for the herdsman first and kill him before attacking a cow or ox. It will be hungry, and having tasted human blood will acquire a liking for it. Once a man-eater the tiger remains a man-eater, encouraged by the ridiculous ease of that sort of sport!"

In India there is quite a literature about such tigers. Some sportsmen specialize in finding and killing them and are not interested in any others. I am told that a man-eater was at

Training of a small elephant just captured

After the capture, great celebrations are held, during which the elephants are daubed with bright colours in powder



Net fishermen on the Brahmaputra

large in the same district before the war and killed as many as thirty-six people, a horrifying number, though far from infrequent in India. The explanation is simple. The brute usually operates over a vast area where not only is it easy to hide but it is protected by local superstitions. Some of the villagers actually compromise with the tiger by voluntarily presenting it with part of their herds, or some poor beast which is injured or getting old. The tacit compact is kept until it is their own turn. When the first, second and third human victims have disappeared, it is time for hostilities.

They keep watch, set traps and lie in wait for it spear in hand. But the tiger has lost its fear of men. It knows their way of life, the times at which they can be found on the paths they have made and the differences between the jungle where they live and the jungle outside. All it fears is fire, man's prime weapon. So it can terrorize a particular district for quite a long time. In certain parts of Assam and Bengal, the local inhabitants only go out in organized bands if there is a man-eater about. One of our hunter friends had great difficulty in even getting his food because none of the natives would lend a hand, all movement having ceased in the forest for miles around.

On the average a man-eater's fate is sealed after eight or nine victims. Jean Naz described his own experience in Indo-China and the conversation gradually took a technical turn. The *Shikari*[1] did not always agree and even when they did, a whiff of dissent helped to liven up the discussion.

My colleague is a fanatical advocate of the *machan*.

"A sordid massacre, not a fight!" chorused the Baruas, who think nothing of spending a whole day on their elephants, rain or shine, stalking their quarry before surrounding and killing it.

From the humane point of view, I do not feel there is much to choose between the method of lying in wait and shooting the animal out of hand and the subtle operation of driving it to utter exhaustion after frustrating all its challenges and ruses in a long pursuit, during which it has ample time to suffer and realize its fate. At first sight, the second procedure seems to me to involve a refinement of cruelty which goes well with the dark skins and great burning eyes of these lords of the jungle.

At first light the trumpets blared out the stand-to. Amahl burst into my tent. I was so sleepy that I could not take in what was happening.

"Get up. *Khobber!*" he cried.

[1] Shikar = hunt; shikari = hunter.

To a *shikari*, the word brings news of big game—tiger, bear or leopard.

I could hear the servants outside calling: "*Bagh! Bagh!*"[1]

"Ling'rah was back before six o'clock this morning and has carried off his prey," Amahl continued. We should have to start about ten. The news was still pretty vague; the villagers had not found the cow's carcass. We would probably have a long chase.

So the day's work was already decided. Lalgi explained that the moment the *khobber* signal is given the hunt must begin at once, whatever the weather; all trails have to be followed and the thickets beaten until the beast is run to earth, fatigue and danger being immaterial.

After a light but quite substantial meal, we mounted our elephants. The Rajkumar placed his guests according to rank or personal preferences. Jean Naz was with Amahl and I myself with the man who was to have the "honour" of delivering the *coup de grace*.

We crossed the river and then traversed a stony steppe beyond which stretched a huge *porali*—jungle which has been fired in places and has nothing left but leafless stumps, bush and dense reeds.

"The natives call this part Baghlali, 'tiger valley'," said Sailesh, Lalgi's cousin, who was sharing Devi-Singh with me. "It's famous for tigers. Tigers up to ten feet long have been found round here. Animals of that size are getting scarcer now, but the tiger is still the largest of our wild beasts."

"How does the elephant behave when there's a tiger about?" I asked.

"You'll see before we've finished. The big mammals, elephants, rhinoceros and buffalo, are what the tiger fears most. They normally keep out of each other's way—that's a law of the jungle—but in a hunt come face to face and that's where danger lies. A maddened tiger will sometimes charge an elephant. Then you have to cling on like mad and the mahout mustn't lose his head if he doesn't want a leg torn off. That's why no one goes tiger-hunting by himself when using an elephant. If the beast attacks, there are plenty of people waiting to fire."

I cast my eye down the long line of our majestic mounts which was being led by Prakritish on Pratap-Singh, one of the finest elephants in India. We had about a score with us and twelve good shots in the party.

When crossing a small stream, a pack of *dschanglis*, all of the same colour as the parched grass, got up and bolted into the

[1] Bagh = tiger.

undergrowth, growling fiercely. It was my first sight of these great wild dogs which are as strong as bulldogs and as big as our greyhounds. They always hunt in packs and never bark.

"We never shoot them," said Sailesh. "They are fearless and even tigers are afraid of them. But when the villagers manage to tame them they make very good watch-dogs."

We were nearing the forest, using all the shade we could get. Lalgi ordered the elephants to be kept together. We noticed stains in the grass and that it was trampled. It was a certain indication that the tiger had passed that way, carrying the dead cow in its jaws. It had stopped there, on the edge of the wood. We made our way into the jungle of dense thorn. The beaters deployed and after more than an hour's drive the tiger bobbed up right under the nose of Menoka, Amahl's elephant. The "honour" had been reserved for someone else, so he could not fire.

The tiger disappeared. But it had been found and the next stage was to surround it. Lalgi signalled his brother to lead the string of beaters who plunged into a woody ravine and were lost to sight as far as I was concerned for the rest of the hunt. From the top of Sailesh's elephant I had a front-seat view, overlooking the rim of the jungle from which the tiger must emerge when it was driven out by the beaters.

We cautiously took up station, taking care not to make a sound. An unearthly silence reigned. Posted on a bit of rising ground, Prakritish provided "cover" on the right, and Lalgi's cousin, Panda, mounted on Kisonlal and one of the best shots in the family, performed the same function on the left.

Down in the ravine, Amahl launched the mahouts and their beasts in an arc of two or three hundred metres and they came towards us to the accompaniment of prolonged, expressive yells which must have struck terror into the heart of the tiger.

Poor Ling'rah! I could almost see him smelling the ground, sniffing the air, wondering about his next move in his mortal combat with men. He knew well enough that man has his methods, remorseless methods at that. Never again would he slake his thirst at the brooks, though his throat was parched with rage, for his life was now a matter of seconds. Crouching in the reeds, he crept forward over the swampy ground where his broad paws prevented him from sinking in, whereas the elephants a few metres away were already up to their bellies. He could charge, of course, but if he did would his charge hurt anything or anybody, having regard to that infernal hind paw which no longer obeyed him? He knew that a mysterious and mortal danger—man with his gun—lurked on the back of the animal he would like to attack!

It was only in the second drive that the lame tiger emerged from cover with a loud and furious roar. It tried to charge Kisonlal, Panda's elephant, but Sailesh stopped it dead with a *400-Express* full in the belly. Unfortunately, our elephant lost its head and lay down, thus depriving my companion of a chance to get in a second shot. I had just time to see it fall, get itself back on its legs and bound into the bushes. In my excitement over this breath-taking scene I failed to notice that I had only just missed sailing over Devi-Singh's head and finding myself face to face with the king of the jungle! I clung like grim death to the girths securing the cushions on which we were sitting, thereby spraining my thumb and skinning fifteen centimetres off my arm when our mount reared. Who minded little things like that in the excitement of such an encounter! And what a grand beast! Is there any wilder music in the jungle of India than the roar of a charging tiger!

In the confusion which followed that first shot and our elephant's panic we lost the tiger, which remained undiscovered for some hours. The undergrowth was beaten again and again and the direction of attack changed five or six times without our seeing him. At four o'clock in the afternoon we drew up for a modest snack in a little clearing. We were soaked to the skin, half-paralysed by six hours on elephant-back and drunk with the heady scents of the forest.

The servants spread out the blankets which are laid over the *guddee*[1] as a sort of cushion and we stretched ourselves out on them to relax our tired muscles. Natives from a nearby Koch village brought us a basketful of little green mangoes, which are most refreshing with a little salt. Then I dozed in the cool shade while the resting elephants feasted on banana stalks and their juicy sap they love so well.

Five o'clock came round and it was time to resume the pursuit. The air was cooler and deep in the forest the toucans and parrots were awakening and screeching loudly.

We set out again. To my companions the jungle was their ordinary milieu but to me a never-failing source of wonderment. We came across the wounded Ling'rah quite unexpectedly. It was *Boro-fandi*[2] who first saw him in a bush, limping painfully towards a clump of tall reeds. Lalgi sent the beaters to cut off his retreat. In a last desperate effort the tiger, mad with pain, charged Amar-Singh, the Boro-fandi's elephant, which proceeded to kneel on the beast in an effort to crush it under its ponderous feet. Once again Ling'rah managed to get clear and

[1] Straps securing the harness.
[2] The great fandi, chief mahout.

after wounding Amar-Singh severely on the inside of the left foreleg tried to slink away in the long grass. But Prakritish was ready and a *500* shot stretched it dead.

It was a magnificent specimen, measuring nine feet, ten inches.

In camp that night there was high festival. A tiger had been killed! The Boro villagers assembled to express their gratitude in graceful dances round the pal. "The cripple" was dead. Its carcass was lying at the edge of the jungle, and by dawn there would be nothing left of it. The vultures were already hovering overhead, anticipating a royal feast at first light. The mahouts had removed the valuable skin, the claws, the whiskers, the smaller bones and the heart—trophies and panaceas both. The fat had been collected; it is an excellent remedy for rheumatism. The sexual organs make a dish which is much appreciated by the less virile males.

The Rajkumar had promised the sacrifice of a kid as homage to the spirit of the dead tiger.

"It was a fine beast all the same," said a Boro mahout. "He's a 'Naga-tiger'! He wouldn't have killed a man! He'd have been quite content with cattle alone! What a pity!"

The reference was to a popular superstition among all the Assam tribes. The Nagas tattoo their bodies in black stripes and it is believed that by certain incantations they can turn themselves into tigers. It is possible to resume human form but only if they have not forgotten to hand a black striped cloth to some reliable friend before the first transformation. The friend promises to cover the tiger with it when he reappears for the change back. If the promise is not kept, whatever the reason, the Naga will never take human form again. Tiger he is, and tiger he will remain, doomed to roam the forest all his life. But these Naga-tigers remember their former existence and do not eat human flesh.

"How did you know he was a Naga-tiger?" Lalgi asked.

"Very simple!" replied the Boro. "By his heart," and put up his two hands to show how. I tried in vain to find out exactly what there was about the tiger's heart that made him so sure, but all the Boro would say was "something", and with that we had to be content.

He is a good mahout and has the reputation, as Prakritish knows, of being a sorcerer.

"Tell your friends I will sacrifice two kids tomorrow," said Prakritish after a pause.

Jean Naz and I went with the Boros to the Boro-fandi's pal.

The tiger's heart was there, placed on a sort of bamboo tray. This organ, which has to animate an extraordinary muscular system, is very big in tigers. The animal has practically no skeleton. Apart from ten kilos of bone, it is all flesh and muscle.

"What will you do with its heart?" asked Jean. Boro-fandi smiled: "It is a relic: it represents the tiger's spirit . . ."

The Boros will piously preserve the heart, sewn up in a bag with leaves and spices which will be buried in some remote spot in the jungle where a little temple will be built and kept up for years. Everyone knows what the tomb of a spirit means to the profoundly religious instincts of the tribesmen round here.

The envoys from the local population who came to tell the Boro-fandi their troubles have gone away satisfied, taking the Ling'rah's heart with them. Equilibrium is restored.

The Boros are as happy as they can be in their primitive way of life. To them happiness does not depend on their social rank in this miserable world, nor even—as with most of us—on their bank account. It means primarily the existing equilibrium between the world around them and the secret world within. It is the latter that I want to make my home, now that I have found it.

EPILOGUE

OUR journey did not end there. We stayed a further ten months in Assam. After spending the monsoon at Gauripur we went back to the Garo and Mikir hills to round off our investigation and enrich our records.

On our second crossing of the Ganges in 1955, twenty months after our first, speech seemed to me futile; my thoughts were all of Assam, the Assam we had traversed and absorbed, so far as was possible in the time at our disposal and allowing for our ignorance of the many dialects spoken by the tribes and peoples in the plains.

It was then that I made a vow to write this book, which has been inspired by one aim and one aim alone—to reveal my delight at my discoveries, the simple truth about these peoples and their moving sincerity.

Assam.
Matiabog Palace, Gauripur.
Saint Cloud, France.

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[*For references by name to the various HILLS, RIVERS, TRIBES, see alphabetical list under HILLS, RIVERS, TRIBES, respectively*]