A young Garo girl (the fiancée)

SECRET LANDS WHERE WOMEN REIGN

by

GABRIELLE BERTRAND

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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.

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

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!