

THE ROAD OF THE STRONG



GEORGE GROSLIER

The Road of the Strong

A Romance of Colonial Cambodia

George GROSLIER

Foreword by
Henri COPIN

Edited by
Kent DAVIS

Translated by
Pedro RODRÍGUEZ

Featuring
Colonial Battambang Today

Revisiting George Groslier's Setting for *The Road of the Strong*
by Tom KRAMER

Including the complete French text of the original 1925 edition:

La Route du plus fort



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About the cover:

Using a 1931 illustration of Angkor as her background, designer Rebecca Klein gives us a vision of the author's protagonist, H el ene Gassin. Next to her is one of her husband's eponymous automobiles; the Roland-Gassin belonging to her host, Pierre Ternier, *r esident de France* in northwestern Cambodia. See the Publisher's Notes for more details.

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Foreword

The Strong, and the Beautiful Girl with the “Crab Fat” Colored Sash

“We are all symbols...”

Published in 1926, *The Road of the Strong* is Cambodian author George Groslier’s first novel. *Cambodian* author? Yes, Cambodian! While it is true that Groslier was not Cambodian in a legal sense, he was indeed born in the land of the Khmer and was undoubtedly among the first Frenchmen to be. More importantly, he was Cambodian in spirit, in his passion for the country of his birth. It was an *informed* passion, if the reader will forgive an apparent oxymoron, for it resulted from painstaking study, and from a fascination with the history and culture of a country that, ten centuries earlier, when Angkor loomed large, had established one of the largest empires in Asia.

Today, nine decades after the appearance of *The Road of the Strong*, the author, the era of the book’s writing, the colonial context, and the very setting of Cambodia itself seem far, far away—in space and especially in time. Most of us can only claim vague familiarity about any of it. We should thus take a moment to review the history, that we might fully appreciate this singular book and the rich contradictions of a man and his time.

A French Cambodian

First the author. Born in 1887, George Groslier was nearly forty when he wrote his first novel, although he already had seven non-fiction books and dozens of academic publications to his credit. Cambodia had seen his birth and would see his death as well,

in 1945, at the close of the Second World War when Indochina was under Japanese occupation. Groslier died a terrible death, under the clubs of the Japanese military police. The *Kempeitai*, as it was known, had arrested him because he was an amateur radio operator, and therefore under suspicion of passing information to the resistance. His tomb reads “*Mort pour la France*” (“died serving France”). “*And Cambodia*”, we might add, so entwined was his fate with his second homeland.

Groslier was the son of a French civil servant who had arrived in Cambodia in 1886 to serve a Protectorate established in 1863. The king of this small, embattled, declining country—all but dismembered by rapacious neighbors Siam (present-day Thailand) and Annam (present-day Vietnam)—had just signed a treaty to ensure its survival. France was a recent arrival to Cochinchina (present-day South Vietnam), so the alliance was of mutual benefit: Cambodia gained not just an ally but, indeed, a protector to keep under check the ambitions of its more powerful neighbors, whereas France tightened its grip on Cochinchina by gaining access to the backcountry around the great port of Saigon. There flowed the Mekong, considered at the time a possible gateway to the vast Chinese market. In reality, however, the Cambodian protectorate quickly gave way to a Cambodian colony, governed by France. The year 1887, when Groslier was born, saw the official founding of the Union of Indochina, a federation that included Cambodia and the three provinces of Vietnam, with Laos joining in October 1893 in the wake of the ‘Paknam incident’¹ a few months earlier. *Indo-China* lost currency to a new term, *Indochina*, which underscored the area’s geographical identity: a vital crossroads east of India and south of China.

1 In July 1893, three French ships were sailing off Paknam, at the mouth of Siam’s Chao Phraya River, when a Siamese fort fired upon them. France won the battle and in the following months proceeded to blockade Bangkok ultimately ending the Franco-Siamese war.

Groslier spent the first two years of his life in Cambodia, before his mother decided that conditions there were intolerable and returned to France, taking young George with her. Her husband stayed behind to continue pursuing his government career. She would never return to Cambodia but, twenty-one years later in 1910, George would. In France, he undertook his studies in Marseille and then in Paris, where he attended the *École des Beaux-Arts* to become a painter. There, he trained in his craft and competed for the *Grand Prix de Rome*.² His failure to win turned him toward a career in colonial service, but his strivings nonetheless made him a lifelong devotee of art. Thenceforth he enjoyed the spectacle of life as he might a good painter's palette, and his writing reflects this artistic vision.

“The Revival of the Khmer Arts”

Returning to the land of his birth—rediscovering it—was a shock for Groslier: one might even say a rebirth. In getting to know the small country of Cambodia, he found grandiose traces of the vanished empire of Angkor, with its refined civilization, imposing temples, its ruins, mythological and religious references, and its enigmas as well. He sojourned in Angkor, studied ancient Khmer art, and soon knew his subject well enough to deliver a series of lectures in France and Belgium. Gaining political access through his wife's family, he was appointed to conduct reforms when the General Government of Cambodia decided to overhaul the country's arts curriculum. He was in any case eminently qualified, with his *Beaux-Arts* education, his knowledge earned in the field, and his own artistic ideas. In fact, Groslier wrote a number of texts on Khmer art. His first book, *Cambodian Dancers: Ancient and Modern*, appeared in 1913, followed in 1916 by *In the Shadow of Angkor*. In 1918, in the pages of the *Revue indochinoise*, he published *La Convalescence des arts cambodgiens* and *L'Agonie des arts*

2 A prestigious French scholarship competition for artists of all types. Winning the award essentially ensured a successful career, however Groslier narrowly missed the mark.

cambodgiens in quick succession. In 1925 he published *La Reprise des arts khmers*.

The scope of the reforms far exceeded any simple teaching of Cambodian arts. The idea was to serve Cambodia, help it rebuild an identity, and burnish French prestige as well—and at the same time to generate revenue through an expansion of tourism and promote Indochina through the cultural treasures of the Khmer. What Groslier undertook in 1917, in the service of both countries, was a rich and complex task. He was to found an institution intended to prompt a true renovation of the Khmer arts, in keeping with the reforms begun after King Sisowath’s trip to France, in 1906. This renovation, jointly undertaken by the Court and the authorities of the Protectorate, needed rekindling, and Groslier was stationed at the bellows. He was to found a new and independent *École des Arts*, basing it on his own view of a people resigned to smiling obscurity, while preserving the memory of a glorious past cut off, as it were, from its cultural identity.

For Groslier, Khmer artistic practice was above all utilitarian and functional, not aesthetic. He wrote as much in *Étude de la psychologie de l’artisan cambodgien*, an article published in 1921, as well as in *Études sur l’art khmer*, published in 1923. The first principle in Groslier’s curriculum was to put exclusive control of Cambodian art in Cambodian hands.

Despite training as a painter, Groslier would never teach at the school. “I am not Khmer”, he declared, and the “fundamental principle” of the School was “only to make Cambodian art and only to have it be made by Cambodians”.³

Foreign influence was to be avoided entirely. In hindsight, we might complain that such a doctrine produces artists devoid of originality. As he wrote elsewhere, however, “my job is to defend,

3 Muan, Ingrid. 2001. *Citing Angkor: The “Cambodian Arts” in the Age of Restoration*. Doctoral Thesis, Columbia University, New York, pp. 77-78.

by all means within my power, the Cambodian tradition.”⁴ We should note, by way of contrast, that the guiding principle behind Hanoi’s *École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts d’Indochine*, founded in 1925 under Victor Tardieu and Nguyen Nam Son, was to renovate the traditional arts while at the same time opening the way to Western influences, and that school was a remarkable success. For Cambodia’s arts, though, everything depended on George Groslier’s particular conception of Khmer ways. His was the capital influence on the *École des Arts*, which he directed; on the *Musée Albert Sarraut*, which he later designed, oversaw in construction and curated; and finally, on the *Direction des Arts* (1920–1944), which oversaw the other institutions.

Such were Groslier’s circumstances in 1926, when he published *The Road of the Strong*, his first novel. He was an artist, a scholar, a central figure in the protection and rejuvenation of Cambodia’s artistic patrimony and in the inspection of historical and archeological antiquities. In this last capacity he was instrumental in the arrest and trial of André Malraux, a man destined to become a major writer and a minister under French president Charles de Gaulle. At the time, however, Malraux was a young adventurer, and a thief of bas-reliefs from the small temple of Banteay Srei, in the Angkor group. If we look beyond this high-profile affair, however, what shines through in Groslier’s actions is a profound commitment to the restoration of Cambodia’s cultural identity around its Angkorian past. Groslier served France and its colonial prestige, but served his vision of Cambodia as well. By that year of 1926, he had published some thirty-five articles on archaeology and a further dozen on “indigenous” arts, all in academic journals of repute. And so the question arises: what could have driven an established scholar and man of action to write a work of fiction—namely, *The Road of the Strong*?

4 Quoted by Gabrielle Abbe in “Le Développement des Arts au Cambodge à l’époque coloniale, George Groslier et l’École des Arts cambodgiens (1917–1945)”, *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, 12, 2014 (published in 2015). This preface owes a considerable debt to the article and its wealth of information.

A Colonial Myth

The answer—or answers, for this is no simple matter—is of course to be found in a careful reading of the book. Let us come right out and state our hypothesis: unlike expository or scholarly writing, fiction permits a juxtaposition of different, even contradictory, points of view, and can thus reflect the ambiguities of real life. In *The Road of the Strong*, Groslier glorifies the colonizing power of France, while also celebrating a Khmer art of living. The same tension is drawn tauter in his second novel, *Return to Clay*, which is an apology for “de-civilization”, a celebration of the Khmer art of living as a return to man’s natural state, and a condemnation of Western “pseudo-civilization”, itself presented as a sort of “de-civilization.” It is a veritable reversal of the values of the colonial doctrine, founded on France’s “civilizing mission.”⁵ “The white man’s burden” Kipling called it! The two novels elucidate each other, for *The Road of the Strong* contains the germ of the revolution in *Return to Clay*. Let us explore a little further, without spoiling anything for the reader.

The first thing to note is that *The Road of the Strong* belongs to the then-nascent genre of “colonial literature”, one definition of which concerns its relation to colonial ideology. Certain works glorify it, with clarions and regalia. Others are subtle in their support. Groslier’s title contains an apology for “the strong”: that is, for the colonizer faced with the passiveness of China. At the same time, it is the strength of the West, with its technical mastery, dealing with the fatalism attributed to Asian man; it is the road as symbol of technical superiority. But it is not merely an expression of domination, for the road is “blazed by the strong for the weak”, given by France to Cambodia. The protagonist, Résident Ternier, a top civil servant in the Protectorate of Cambodia, lives his life in devotion to his mission, to the roads

5 In French, *mission civilisatrice*. A code characterizing the responsibility of France to introduce civilization, technology, education and rule of law into their colonies in Africa and Indochina.

that link beings, bring villages into the world, open up economies, and guarantee security and peace.

“We had come, and in a few years had built a new city between gardens overhung with century-old mango trees. [...] Places once isolated by days and days of travel we have now linked to the rest of the country by roads”, he says. The road theme runs the length of the novel, structures the story, and sets out the characters. It opens in the French countryside where Ternier, on holiday, meets automobile manufacturer Roland Gassin and his wife Hélène. Later, the Gassins travel to Indochina where the focus shifts to urban automobiles on colonial roads—roads that Ternier is responsible for building and maintaining. The message is clear: mother country and colony are complementary. There is, in the pragmatic view of colonial ideology, mutual benefit.

Moreover, the representation is very much of its time. The period between the world wars saw the development of maritime, air, and land transport, and with it the birth of tourism, though of a kind still limited to the élite. As distances shrank, people built mansions in the colonies, around the Mediterranean, in Indochina, at Angkor. Already in 1908 the Duke of Montpensier was shuttling between Saigon and Angkor by car, without losing so much as a bolt on the way! Though towed by buffalo out of many an impasse, his “Lorraine Diétrich 24/30 HP with reinforced American chassis” scaled the stairs at Angkor Wat to tool around the monumental grounds! The Croisière Noire and later the Croisière Jaune demonstrated the automobile’s power to dissolve geographical, cultural and political frontiers in the world.⁶ Eiffel’s metallic architecture made it possible to build bridges, like the Long Biên Bridge in Hanoi, or to lay down a railroad, with countless works of engineering, all the way to southern China. In

6 The Croisière Noire (Black Cruise), was a 20,000 kilometer auto expedition in Africa organized by André Citroën to promote his brand of cars. The trip lasted from 28 October 1924 to 26 June 1925, just a year before Groslier published *The Road of the Strong*. Six years later, Citroën organized the Croisière Jaune (Yellow Cruise) in Asia, which ran from 4 April 1931 to 12 February 1932.

its extensive photo spreads, the newspaper *L'Illustration* offered up a vision of colonial development, associating it with efficacy and modernity. Throughout Indochina, 1920 was a year of economic growth (and of heavy taxation for peasants). By 1930, a Cambodia far removed from that of 1863 could boast some 9,000 km of roads, laid down largely by *corvée* (roadwork performed in exchange for tax relief) and would soon have a railroad to Siam. In 1931, the Paris International Colonial Exhibition would promote the colonial system at its apogee (with its decline close at hand), around a reproduction of the temple of Angkor Wat right in the middle of France's capital city.

Thus, Groslier built his fiction on his experience of reality and his vision of the colonial endeavor. Other writers—like Roland Dorgelès, with his reportage *Sur la route mandarine*, or novelist Henry Daguères, with his *Le Kilomètre 83*, which imagines an episode in the construction of the Cambodian railroad—sketch these representations as well, in their own way. In sum, there was at the time a consensus: to colonize is to work toward progress, and the road is indisputably a symbol of colonization.

This affords us a first reading of the novel as the reflection of a certain reality. Résident Ternier, now back to his post supervising road construction in northeastern Cambodia, learns that Roland and Hélène Gassin are headed to Indochina to investigate automobile manufacturing opportunities. He extends an invitation to the couple to discover his Cambodia, with its landscapes, its cities, its wilderness, its forests, its pagodas, its inhabitants, and its French expatriates. Hélène arrives first while Roland concludes his business deals in Vietnam. The colonial builder thus begins showing the newly arrived urbanite the significance of his undertaking, and its usefulness both to France and to Cambodia. Chapter after chapter he details the daily tasks and the value of a mission that is larger than the individuals involved, and transfigures them: “It had entailed...the simultaneous enrichment of two

civilizations. Their labor on a road benefitted not just their own country or clan but also that of another people.”⁷

This colonial chronicle culminates with an official reception, at which a narrow, tuxedo-clad French society—with silverware, fine wines, French cuisine, decorum and protocol, old, picturesque colonial anecdotes, and a useless, decorative Cambodian governor—gathers around Résident Ternier. Groslier describes, with acerbic wit, the microcosm that makes the light of civilization glow out in the bush, in the middle of the night, around the veritable beacon that is the Résident: “From this man radiated roads [...] white with moonshine, spanning his province like the symbol of the great pacifying hand he had laid upon it. Within this star [...] more than three hundred thousand souls lay asleep. Every guest who raised his crystal glass into the prosperous air had done his duty, as well.”

The novel abounds with references to the endeavor, to its protagonists, to its beneficiaries. They are at times needlessly insistent, and go so far as to suggest that Résident Ternier, and thus France, has in fact taken the torch from the great ancients, the creators of Angkor and its royal roads. “You will make your road, commands the one to the other. For ten centuries you have been dreaming and degenerating. The time for dreaming is over. Today we forge.” This is the purpose of creation in fiction: to fashion myths that take reality as their basis and elucidate it.

Under the Gaze of Women

And yet, if in his ideal world the character of Résident Ternier seems at times as monolithic as a statue, and all but impervious to doubt, Groslier’s story provides a glimpse of another world, a parallel and different world. Beside the Cambodia that the Résident

7 Indeed, Ternier goes on to say: “All colonization, says one claim, operates on a principle that is false, or at least debatable, and at times even inopportune, but for this the colonists are not responsible.” The apology for the road leads to meditation on the legitimacy of the use of force that forms the basis of any colonization. The idea would be taken up later by Albert Sarraut in his *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* (1931).

shows (and demonstrates), we attain another, more complex reading through the eyes of the two women, Hélène and Vetonea.

It is Hélène, the urbanite with the fresh view, who, in making her discoveries, first reveals the charm of the villages, the bucolic scenes of daily life, the slow carts, the paunchy junks, the markets, the children at play, the men traveling on foot, the sounds, the scents, the odors. It is she who, after the official reception, sings the praises of the simple village *sala*,⁸ which welcomes the traveler without fuss but not without courtesies. It is she who lends an ear to the carts, “these carts [...] forever criss-crossing the country. Today they were going to sing for her. They are elegant vehicles, put together like living bodies. Their axles hiss and grind, changing their inflection with every change in the turn of the wheels. On and on they cry, for as long as the road lasts. They are loudest in the forest, grumble in the morning, and shriek in broad sunlight.” It is through her eyes that Groslier depicts the perfect ballet of naked bodies walking in the forest: “His changeable architecture is prestigious through and through. The shield-like convexity of the thorax and back, the twin weaponry of the arms, the legs propelling the marvelous machine. [...] What sincerity, what loyalty can be more earnest and forthright than frank nudity? [...] And something else as well, liberty, radiates from the whole, which the very air sustains and smiles upon.”

This hymn to the state of nature, to the original beauty of bodies and beings, to the liberty that they exude, is the core subject of Groslier’s second novel, *Return to Clay*, but its germ is present here, in counterpoint to the hymn to *civilization*. *Naked man* is not quite the same symbol as *the road*. Groslier reveals more of himself as he goes along. While his characters engage in peaceful meditation with the fall of night, the author speaks up, to address...whom exactly? We do not properly know. Himself, perhaps: “You have escaped your routine. You have slipped your yoke. You have set

8 A village house kept specifically for travelers to stay the night in.

aside convention to see something else. [...] Free! You have sought to be free! [...] Nature lies dead between your cities; here it reigns supreme. In your world man remains forever remote beneath the many masks he borrows; here man is naked, and in the richness of his nudity stands in opposition to you....”

And this strange chink in Ternier’s scabrous armor, this avowed weakness for full-bloom liberty in the natural setting of Cambodia, expands as the story advances, until we reach a troubling confession: “I am the civilization necessary to man, you say, the civilization dictated and desired by man. [...] [T]his entails something else: that you...are the strong. However gently you set your broad hand upon the world, whatever the saving certainties you set loose upon it, you will kill.”

Behold civilized man become pervious to doubt.

That Subtle, Proud Girl with the “Crab Fat” Sash

It is, then, through the eyes of a woman, Héléne, that this other reality, different from that of an ideological discourse, is established. But there is yet another woman who plays a key role in the novel: Vetonea, Ternier’s little native wife, the *prâpôn*, a “subtle, proud girl... [with] a light ocher complexion.” In the mass of Cambodians who populate the book, none of whom are treated as true individuals, Vetonea alone is sketched with specificity, in a singular portrait high in contrast. Is she a secondary character? Yes, absolutely, for she is the little wife forbidden to show herself, “that disconcerting creature: the native consort of a European man,” “an emanation of the land and the sum of its charms.” But she makes her entrance at a pivotal point in the book, and redirects the story. What if she were the novel’s true protagonist? But I will say no more, dear reader! Make your own discoveries, and carefully observe young Vetonea, “fresh and dry, and as agreeable as ivory,” a little idol whom Ternier thinks he can “tame”, for all kinds of good reasons that appeal to the strong.

She is to me the true cause of the oh-so-powerful Résident's unavowable weakness, and the true symbol of the Cambodia with which Groslier was so madly smitten, in every sense, and that he depicts in so many marvelous watercolors throughout the story, evoking the settings as they arise, their forms and colors bursting luxuriously forth: "knots of ginger, water-lily flowers, Chinese chestnuts, the shredded flesh of dried fish, bean sprouts like larvae in agglomeration, skeins of transparent noodles, stacked small jars of fermented sauces, jars of red chalk resembling a paste of corals, black tobacco, regular ranks of spade-shaped betel leaves, peanuts, brown saffron." Groslier the painter could not resist colors and shapes, and went so far as to paint "rubbish heaps: as lovely, almost, as the stalls themselves" and matter "disintegrating in brilliant coquetry before it could rot."

I reread this book many years after discovering it and am struck by the marvelous opportunities it provides to arrange symbols, or even create myths, that coexist with their differences, and their contradictions, and their contrary meanings. Road versus path. Civilization versus nature. Progress versus liberty. One can take the position that man's will should dominate, that man should take action and transform reality, and still betray a violent attraction for all that must vanish as a result of one's action. An attraction, or perhaps a preference? To these opposing tensions everyone will attribute the meaning they see fit.

As for Groslier, he brings his book to a close with an instance of magnificent ambiguity: "Your road crosses a region, and, like an arrow, pierces to the heart. Onto the road the automobile manufacturer will dispatch his machines. But the crossed region will strike at his heart as well."

Henri Copin

October 31, 2017 — Nantes, France

Henri COPIN

Henri Copin is internationally recognized as a leading specialist in French colonial literature for his lectures, critiques, works and analyses that help these historical masterpieces live again.

Copin first traveled to French Indochina in his mother's arms after his birth in Paris in 1945. There, he spent his first 16 years in Vietnam and Cambodia witnessing the Indochina War, the waning of French presence in the Indochinese Peninsula, and the early years of Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese independence.



A century of shared history between France and Indochina drew him to devote his professional life to the culturally rich literature of the region. In 1994 he received his degree at the Sorbonne, with Harmattan publishing his thesis in 1996: *L'Indochine dans la littérature française des années vingt à 1954, Exotisme et altérité* [*Indochina in French Literature from 1920-1954, Exoticism and Otherness*]. He was appointed Professor of Humanities at Saint Louis, Senegal and taught at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Dakar before returning to France where he is now a permanent professor and lecturer at the University of Nantes.

The Road of the Strong

George Groslier

*“It is at times a grave misfortune
that human nature is so complex and so simple,
that man’s perspicacity, subtle as it is,
should walk right past profound and beautiful things
without even a hint of recognition.”*

I

Spice-laden Air

Out on the road through lovely Auvergne, somewhere between Royat and Fontanat.¹ To one side, gently sloping meadows; to the other, springs bubbling lively and cool from the rocks. A medley of slanting sunbeams and trickling water, and a tiny rainbow hovering over the moss.

Driverless, hood propped open, a motorcar stood idle. Inside, a couple resigned to their circumstance. The man a strapping lad above thirty years of age, the woman slim and blond, with the long, slender hands one has often seen on Italian ladies since the Quattrocento masters.² The car was a Roland-Gassin, equipped for the road and, like the road, dusty.

Out on the same road to take in the lovely June evening was a second car, it too a Roland-Gassin, and of the same model. The Annamite³ at the wheel was driving at a crawl, and behind him

1 Now called Fontanas, this scenic village, 5 km west of Royat at the top of Puy de Dôme, has been popular with painters since the 19th century. Royat itself is renowned for hot water baths, the perfect cure for the aching bodies of colonials visiting home. [www.tourisme-royat-chamalieres.com]

2 An abbreviation of *millequattrocento* (1400), *quattrocento* is a shorthand for the Italian fifteenth century. The masters in this case are the great Italian painters of the time, like Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. (Groslier was himself a skilled painter, trained at the *École des Beaux Arts*, in Paris.)

3 'Annamite' was used as a general term for 'Vietnamese', including people from Tonkin and Cochinchina, even though 'Annam' corresponds only to Vietnam's central area.

l lounged a man lost in the landscape and delighting in the hour, a short pipe clenched beneath his bushy, drooping moustache. Glimpsing the car in distress, the man sat up, called for a halt, and addressed the couple.

“Have you run into some trouble?”

“Magneto’s gone dead, Monsieur.”

The man alighted and introduced himself.

“Pierre Ternier, *résident de France*⁴ in Indochina.”

“Roland Gassin, carmaker. My wife.”

Bowing, Ternier turned with a smile toward the open hood.

“A poor advertisement, Monsieur, but I am familiar with the make.”

A new gurgle from the cool springs—the giggle, in fact, of Madame Gassin. The cars had made each other’s acquaintance, and the ice was broken.

“Our driver has gone to Royat to fetch a new car. We’re expecting him.”

“I am myself stopping at Royat. Pray, do not wait here. Allow me to drive you.”

Aboard they climbed, and the functioning car got back under way.

Words flow easily between people of the same stratum, out in the countryside, under such conditions. The Gassins had planned to reach Clermont by evening and push on to Saint-Étienne on the morrow. Ternier, meanwhile, was planning to stay on in Royat, for the waters, and especially to wander about at the foot of the Dômes,⁵ before rounding out his holiday in Paris. Colonists, even the eminent among them, are little known in France, but the couple were quick to grasp that they were in the company of

4 This title reflects a political appointment to administrate a sub-region in one of the five provinces of French Indochina: Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Cambodia and Laos. The *résident* would in turn report to the *Résident-Supérieur* in his region.

5 The Dômes are the dormant volcanoes of the Chaîne des Puys, a mountain range within France’s Massif Central.

4 *The Road of the Strong*

a distinguished man. What's more, a customer had run into his manufacturer—the man responsible for a renowned automotive brand, then enjoying quite the vogue—on the road in Auvergne.

The evening continued at the Hôtel du Parc, where Ternier had taken his lodgings, while his car went back along the road to look for the Gassins' driver. The repairs were going to take hours. There was a nip in the air. A small table was set up in a hall that overlooked the park and gave a glimpse of the mountains. To decorate, heather of amethyst yellow was arranged in a great crystal bowl. The friendship that would bind the Gassins and Ternier was forged then and there. They looked at one another frankly, spoke in agreeable tones, and harbored no guile in their peaceful hearts; an easy sympathy was quickly established.

In short measure they met again in Paris.

Roland Gassin was not one to stand still. Having inherited a factory in Levallois-Perret from his father, he had surrounded himself with select personnel. Self-assured as he was in matters of business, he had rapidly put the innovations of his engineers to use and achieved enduring success. He held to the often highfalutin notions of those who triumph by following a well-blazed trail and readily conclude that anyone who fails in life must be some sort of oaf. The steady effort such people make gradually obscures the role that luck has played in their lives. They know neither misery nor betrayal. Like one of his engines, Roland Gassin was himself a complex, highly elaborate mechanism, with every component precisely aligned and controlled.

His wife, whom he had met in his industrial milieu some ten years earlier, was of a different, less easily defined character. We shall try to understand her by observing her in life. Madame Gassin's urbane virtues and simple ways defied analysis. She seemed eminently supple and feminine—feminine women are so rare these days. Nothing about this woman was apparent to the eye. Not that she was a dissembling sort; quite the contrary. She was uniformly

enameled in a lovely, pure color, with no fissure to be seen. But was it the enamel that was colored, or was the stuff underneath showing through a transparent top coat? One could not say. Win her confidence, and she would get chummy, and seem to place herself under your wing. Her charm lay perhaps in a strong will that she never exerted, as if it were superfluous, for, after all, she was a woman and judged you to be a gallant man. Madame Gassin said she would do this or that, and then went ahead and did it. “Off I go,” and she would rise and depart. “Tomorrow at ten o’clock,” and the following day she would appear at ten. “I’ll write,” and she would write. In everyday life these little resolutions have but a feeble hold on us; we seize on the slightest pretext to shrug them off. And yet it is by shouldering these slight burdens—far more than by engaging in vain, herculean labors—that we reveal our strength of will. This is, no doubt, the truly feminine dimension of will. It subtly follows its course, never drawing the man’s attention, until one day the man yields. By then it is too late for him to take up the iron rod and vanquish the woman.

Madame Gassin loved her husband, and he had a tender affection for his companion of rare quality. The happy trust he showed in her, their community of tastes, the delicate and timely attentions they exchanged prove at least that Gassin was mindful of the object of our inquiry.

Did Madame Gassin hope, through some painstaking sense of modesty, to conceal at all costs the qualities of her heart, so as to reserve them for her own use? Did she believe that too diaphanous a veil would sully her sentimentality, as it would the secret contours of her body? Was it pride or scruple that kept her from revealing anything she considered a weakness? Did she suppose, out of stubborn principle, that any passion shown her husband would no longer belong to her, and that this gave her all the more reason to withhold it entirely? Had she made her love into a secret ritual? Did she believe that by merely speaking of love she would divulge her own? Did she, in fact, love at all? All these questions we could have

answered in a moment's time with a yes or a no by seeing whether Madame Gassin replied with candor to our privately made allusions or, instead, stanching the flow of our words by staring off into the distance.

She was, mind you, neither a snoot nor sanctimonious. She had no fear of words, and a witty allusion could get a laugh out of her. It spooked her sensibility, however, when an inquiry approached the heights or depths of feeling, the regions where she truly dwelled. She was like one of those birds that live only in the far corners of a forest or at great heights. Moreover, she had great affection for her sister, an elder sister, named Annie Belgrand. Few were on an intimate footing with Annie, for she had lived a retired life ever since a terrible train crash had mangled in an instant both her husband and her ten-year-old boy.

A final stroke, which the account to follow will not make, will sufficiently refine our portrait of Madame Gassin. She was one of those women who know how to listen, and whose intelligence lies plainly on their face like a luminous mask. Her bearing and her curiosity toward you were like a question hanging latent in the air as she sat erect in her armchair, ankles crossed, eyes wide open and fixed upon your own. Sifting your words for every valid morsel, she would stir your need to speak. Such attentive women keep their allusions discreet and their questions insidious. In revealing yourself to them you discover who you are. From the imbecile who does not flee at their approach they can draw forth sensible words. They have a deep and brilliant inner life, for in reflection they must know how to listen to themselves as well. Their ability to "attend" all manner of men endows them with a wide, florid, polished learning by virtue of the talent or conscientiousness of these same men, who transmit this learning to them, and whom they wisely select for the purpose. And men hasten to recognize the depth and superiority of such women, for an attentive ear flatters their vanity and satisfies them that their words are not devoid of interest.

Ternier was not immune to this charm, especially since Madame Gassin showed more than her usual curiosity toward this idle, haughty, courteous passer-by. In the brilliant circle of the Gassins' regular society—engineers, businessmen, industrialists, and other upstanding citizens—certain members, especially women, were susceptible to the *esprit nouveau*.⁶ Or, rather, the conversations turned on matters to which Madame Gassin had grown accustomed. Certain men of letters would stop by, as would artists. Dinners were refined, and winged words would glide through the wafting aromas. Yet there was no clash between the new guest and the guest of yesterday evening. His turn of mind, his erudition, his moral qualities caused no mishap. They blended right in with those of the Gassins' select, uniform milieu.

The colonist made his mark with the prestige of the distant, unknown lands he came from. His conviction, the occasional coarseness of his conversation, his freedom with paradox were so much new music on novel themes. Whether Ternier described the colonial administration or depicted indigenous life, whether he held forth on civilizational programs, planned or carried out, or limited his conversation to anecdotes and memories, Madame Gassin felt as if she had new, spice-laden air to breathe. She was his best listener, abandoned herself more completely to this atmosphere than anyone else, though Ternier was careful to banish from her mind any fanciful notions or sense of adventure. In particular he gave the lie to that tenacious, absurd *colonial legend* in which so many misinformed people delight. Indeed his words carried great weight with her, for the “colonial” or “exotic” novels she had read had left her with dubious impressions and artificial tableaux. The *résident's* revelations and sobriety, disconcerting though she still found them, served as an invitation to advance by dint of logic through

6 New way of thinking—literally, new spirit or new state of mind. The passage might be referring to the *esprit nouveau* in French letters, a movement spearheaded by poets like Guillaume Apollinaire, John Perse, and Max Jacob, who sought to give free rein to their imagination, break free from traditional forms and rhyme, and explore modernity and the quotidian: in short, to explore what was happening on the street. (The central image of this novel is, of course, a road.)

this unfamiliar territory, on well-laid roads lit by his tranquil good sense, and allow herself to be led along by the trailblazer's deep conviction.

Thus the Gassin house, at 27 Avenue d'Eylau,⁷ had a distinctly colonial season late in the year, until Ternier returned to his post, in the Sangkae province of northern Cambodia.



⁷ A prestigious address, on the heights behind the Trocadero.

Appendices

George GROSLIER Profile –1928

by Paul E. BOUDET

Book review: *Revue des lectures*

15 January, 1926

The Works of George Groslier

Publisher's Notes

by Kent DAVIS

Colonial Battambang Today

Revisiting George Groslier's Setting
for "The Road of the Strong"

by Tom KRAMER

Le Route du plus fort

1925

Complete original French text

Avant-propos moderne par Henri COPIN

La Route du plus fort

George GROSLIER

C'est parfois un bien grand malheur que la nature humaine soit si complexe et si simple et que la perspicacité de l'homme, pourtant si subtile, passe à côté de belles et profondes choses sans même les pressentir.

Avant-propos moderne par
Henri COPIN

Édition originale par
Éditions Émile-Paul Frères
14, Rue de l'Abbaye, 14
1925

Le plus fort, et la belle fille à l'écharpe couleur « graisse de crabe »

« *Nous sommes tous des symboles...* »

La Route du plus fort, qui paraît en 1926, est le premier roman de George Groslier, écrivain cambodgien. Cambodgien ? Oui Cambodgien ! Certes, Groslier n'est pas Cambodgien pour l'état-civil, mais il l'est par sa naissance en 1887, sans doute le premier Français né dans le pays des Khmers. Et il l'est encore bien plus par la véritable passion qu'il porte à sa terre natale, une passion que l'on pourrait appeler raisonnée, si ces mots allaient ensemble, car elle résulte d'une construction de connaissances savantes, combinées avec la fascination pour l'histoire et la culture d'un pays qui avait été, dix siècles plus tôt, le plus grand Empire de l'Asie, au temps du rayonnement d'Angkor.

Aujourd'hui, huit décennies après la publication de *La Route du plus fort*, l'auteur, l'époque où il écrit, le contexte colonial et le cadre du Cambodge nous apparaissent bien lointaines, dans l'espace et surtout dans le temps. La plupart d'entre nous en ignorent presque tout. Il est donc nécessaire de prendre quelques instants pour les resituer dans leur histoire, et pouvoir ainsi apprécier ce livre singulier, et riche des contradictions d'un homme et d'une époque.

Un Français Cambodgien...

L'auteur, tout d'abord. George Groslier, né en 1887, approche donc la quarantaine quand paraît son premier roman, et, bien sûr, il ignore qu'il lui reste moins de vingt ans à vivre, dans ce pays qui l'a vu naître, puis le verra mourir, en 1945, en cette fin de Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, alors que l'Indochine est encore occupée par le Japon. George meurt tragiquement, sous les coups de la terrible police militaire japonaise.

La Route du Plus Fort

George GROSLIER

I

Sur la route, entre Royat et Fontanat, dans la belle Auvergne. D'un côté, les prés en pente douce ; de l'autre, les roches d'où suintent des sources vives et froides. Le soleil oblique se mêle au bruissement de l'eau et un minuscule arc-en-ciel frôle les mousses.

Privée de chauffeur, capot ouvert, une automobile stationnait. Un couple résigné l'occupait ; lui, grand garçon ayant passé la trentaine ; elle, mince, blonde, avec ces mains longues et fines qu'on voit souvent aux Italiennes depuis les Quattrocen-tistes. La voiture était une Roland-Gassin, équipée pour la route et poudreuse comme elle.

La belle soirée de juin poussait sur cette même route une seconde voiture, Roland-Gassin aussi et de même type. Derrière un chauffeur annamite qui conduisait avec une extrême lenteur, un homme à la moustache forte et tombante, une courte pipe sous cette moustache, se carrait avec désinvolture, tout au paysage et au bien-être de l'heure. Lorsqu'il aperçut la voiture désemparée, il se redressa, fit arrêter et s'adressa au couple :

— Vous est-il arrivé quelque chose de fâcheux ?

— Panne sèche de magnéto, monsieur.

Alors il descendit et se présenta :

— Pierre Ternier, Résident de France en Indochine.

— Roland Gassin, constructeur d'automobiles. Ma femme.

Ternier s'inclina et tournant un sourire vers le capot ouvert :

— Mauvaise réclame, monsieur, mais je connais la marque.

Les sources fraîches eurent un bruissement nouveau : c'était madame Gassin qui riait. Et puisque les voitures s'étaient reconnues, chacun fut à l'aise.

— Le chauffeur est parti à Royat chercher une autre voiture et nous l'attendons.

— Je descends moi-même à Royat. Je vous en prie, n'attendez pas ici et permettez-moi de vous y conduire.

On s'installa et l'automobile valide continua sa route.

On communique aisément entre gens du même monde, en pleine campagne et dans de telles circonstances. Les Gassin comptaient arriver à Clermont le soir et continuer sur Saint-Etienne le lendemain. Ternier, lui, stationnait à Royat pour les eaux et surtout vagabonder aux pieds des Dômes avant de retourner achever son congé à Paris. Les coloniaux, même éminents, sont peu connus en France, mais le ménage comprit bientôt qu'il était en présence d'un homme distingué. Et, le client rencontra son fournisseur sur une route d'Auvergne, le possesseur de cette marque si réputée, alors en pleine vogue.

La soirée se poursuivit à l'Hôtel du Parc, où était descendu Ternier, tandis que sa voiture retournait sur la route guetter le chauffeur des Gassin. Le dépannage demanda plusieurs heures. Il faisait frais. Dans le hall qui domine le parc et d'où l'on entrevoit les montagnes, on dressa une petite table que des bruyères, dans une large coupe de cristal, ornèrent d'améthyste. Ainsi et là, l'amitié qui devait lier les Gassin et Ternier prit naissance en raison de cette sympathie rapide que suscitent la franchise des regards, le son des voix et la quiétude des âmes sans détour.

Ils se retrouvèrent bientôt à Paris.

Roland Gassin était un esprit actif. Dans l'usine de Levallois-Perret qu'il tenait de son père, entouré d'un personnel de choix, sa sûreté d'homme d'affaires avait rapidement conduit à un succès durable les trouvailles de l'ingénieur. Il avait de la vie cette notion souvent hautaine de ceux qui suivent une voie bien tracée, y triomphent et concluent volontiers que celui qui échoue est un maladroit. L'effort constant qu'ils savent accomplir efface peu à peu, à leurs yeux, la part de chance qui les sert. Ils ne connaissent ni la misère, ni la trahison. Et Roland Gassin fonctionnait comme l'un de ses moteurs dans une action complexe et sévèrement concertée où tout se commande et s'enchaîne avec précision.

Sa femme, qu'il avait rencontrée une dizaine d'années auparavant dans son milieu industriel, était d'une nature plus difficile à définir. Nous tenterons de la comprendre en la regardant vivre. Ses vertus mondaines et la simplicité de ses allures déjouaient l'examen. Elle semblait éminemment souple et féminine. Les femmes féminines

sont si rares maintenant. Rien en celle-ci n'était saisissable, non pas qu'elle dissimulât, bien au contraire : un émail uni la recouvrait avec régularité, sans craquelure et d'une belle couleur pure. Mais on ne savait si cette couleur était celle de l'émail ou si l'émail transparent laissait voir la couleur de la matière qu'il enveloppait. Dès qu'elle se confiait, elle devenait une sorte de camarade ayant l'air de se mettre sous votre protection. Peut-être que son charme était d'avoir une volonté puissante et de n'en pas user, comme si elle estimait ne pas en avoir besoin puisqu'elle était femme et vous jugeait galant homme. Madame Gassin disait : je ferai ceci, cela et elle le faisait. Je pars, elle se levait et partait. Demain, dix heures ; le lendemain, à dix heures, elle paraissait. J'écrirai ; elle écrivait. Ces petites résolutions sont dans la vie courante d'un pouvoir lâche et l'on s'en libère à tout propos. C'est à manier pourtant ces poids légers, et souvent bien mieux qu'à s'arc-bouter inutilement aux rochers, que la volonté se décèle. Et sans doute est-ce la forme vraiment féminine de la volonté, puisqu'ainsi elle suit subtilement sa carrière sans que l'homme y prenne garde. Un jour il s'y soumet malgré la barre de fer dont il s'arme trop tard pour la vaincre.

Madame Gassin aimait son mari. Chez celui-ci perçait une tendre admiration pour cette compagne d'une rare qualité. La confiance heureuse que son mari lui témoignait, la communauté de leurs goûts, les attentions délicates et toujours opportunes qu'ils échangeaient prouvaient du moins que Gassin était fixé sur ce qui aiguisait notre curiosité.

Est-ce que madame Gassin, par une pudeur attentive, entendait à tout prix celer les qualités de son cœur, afin d'en disposer complètement ; considérait-elle que sa sentimentalité, comme les formes secrètes de son corps, eût été souillée par des voiles transparents ; avait-elle l'orgueil ou le souci de ne rien livrer de ce qu'elle considérait comme une faiblesse ; supposait-elle, par un scrupule opiniâtre, que toute sa passion offerte à son mari ne lui appartenait plus et qu'elle devait en conserver d'autant plus l'intégralité ; s'était-elle fait, de son amour, un rituel secret et s'imaginait-elle que parler même de l'amour eût risqué de divulguer le sien — aimait-elle, même ? Voilà toutes les questions auxquelles nous pouvions, dans le même instant, répondre par l'affirmative ou la négative, soit qu'aux allusions que nous tentions dans l'intimité, la bouche de madame Gassin s'entrouvrît avec candeur, soit que son regard se perdît au-delà de nos paroles afin d'en suspendre le cours.

Entendez bien qu'elle n'était point pimbêche, ni bigote. Les mots ne l'épouvantaient pas et son rire résonnait au choc des allusions plaisantes. Il semblait que ce fût dans les régions élevées ou profondes des sentiments que sa sensibilité s'effarouchait, lorsque l'investigation approchait de certains domaines où madame Gassin devait se tenir, telle ces oiseaux qui ne vivent que dans les parties reculées des forêts ou aux grandes hauteurs. Elle avait, d'autre part, une affection profonde pour sa sœur, Annie Belgrand, plus âgée qu'elle. On connaissait peu celle-ci, car à la suite d'une catastrophe de chemin de fer qui lui avait broyé, dans la même seconde, son mari et un garçonnet de dix ans, elle vivait très retirée.

Je préciserai suffisamment le portrait de madame Gassin en ajoutant ici un dernier trait que le récit du drame qui va suivre ne laisserait pas disparaître. Elle était une de ces femmes qui savent écouter et dont il semble qu'on voie l'intelligence saisissable et épandue sur leur visage comme un masque lumineux. Droite dans son fauteuil, les pieds croisés, les yeux bien ouverts sur les vôtres, elle vous posait, par son maintien et la curiosité qu'elle vous accordait, une question latente et, filtrant tout ce que votre parole pouvait contenir de valable, elle faisait naître en vous le besoin de vous exprimer. Les allusions de ces femmes attentives sont discrètes et leurs questions insidieuses. Vous vous trouvez vous-même à mesure que vous vous découvrez à elles. Si l'imbécile ne fuit pas lorsqu'elles apparaissent, elles savent lui soutirer des paroles sensées. Elles ont une vie intérieure profonde et brillante car, aussi bien, doivent-elles savoir, dans la méditation, s'écouter elles-mêmes. Leur pouvoir « d'assister » ainsi à toutes sortes d'hommes les enrichit de connaissances variées, fleuries et châtiées par le talent ou la conscience de ceux qui les leur transmettent et qu'elles savent choisir. Aussi sont-elles reconnues profondes et supérieures d'autant plus volontiers par les hommes que ceux-ci, la vanité satisfaite d'être attentivement écoutés, se convainquent de l'intérêt des paroles qu'ils dispensent.

Ternier n'échappa pas à ce charme, d'autant que madame Gassin témoigna plus de curiosité que de coutume à ce passant désœuvré, hautain et courtois. Les familiers du ménage, ingénieurs, hommes d'affaires, industriels et de bonne société, formaient un cercle brillant où quelques-uns, et les femmes surtout, donnaient dans l'esprit nouveau. Ou bien, les conversations se nourrissaient de questions dont madame Gassin avait acquis l'habitude. Quelques littérateurs passaient avec des artistes. On donnait des dîners fins où des paroles ailées traversaient l'arôme des plats. Cependant, l'invité nouveau ne s'opposait pas au convive de la veille. Sa tournure d'esprit, son érudition ou ses qualités morales se mêlaient, au contraire, sans imprévu, à toutes celles qui formaient ce milieu égal et choisi.

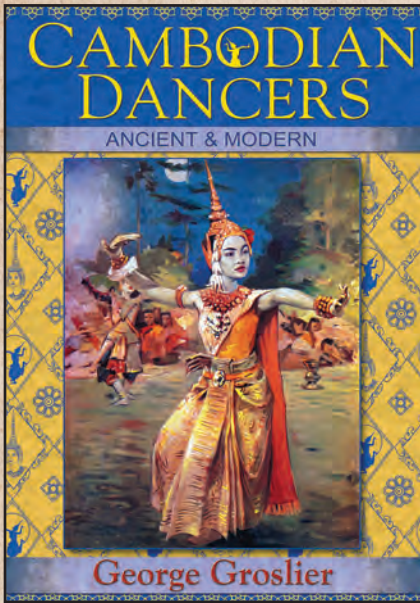
Le colonial s'imposa donc avec le prestige du lointain et de l'inconnu d'où il venait. Sa conviction, la rudesse parfois de son verbe, la liberté de ses paradoxes donnaient des sons nouveaux sur des thèmes inédits. Soit qu'il décrivît l'administration coloniale, soit qu'il peignît la vie indigène, soit encore qu'il développât tel programme de civilisation instauré ou à appliquer, soit enfin qu'il s'en tint à l'épisode ou à ses propres souvenirs, une atmosphère jamais respirée et qui sentait les épices, enveloppait madame Gassin. Plus et mieux que tout autre, elle s'y abandonna, bien que Ternier se fût appliqué à détruire en elle toute idée romanesque et tout esprit d'aventure. Il attaqua surtout de front cette tenace et saugrenue légende coloniale dans laquelle tant de gens mal informés se complaisent. Et sa parole prit d'autant plus de force dans l'esprit de madame Gassin que, jusqu'alors, des romans dit « coloniaux » ou « exotiques » ne lui avaient laissé que des impressions douteuses et des tableaux artificiels. Si les révélations et les touches sobres du Résident la déroutaient encore, elles l'invitaient à s'avancer désormais dans tout cet inconnu en

démarches logiques, sur des routes bien établies, éclairée d'un tranquille bon sens et surtout entraînée par la conviction profonde du défricheur qu'il était.

Voilà pourquoi, il y eut au 27 de l'avenue d'Eylau, chez les Gassin et à la fin de cette année-là, une saison coloniale, jusqu'au moment où Ternier partit rejoindre son poste, la province de Sangkè, dans le Cambodge septentrional.

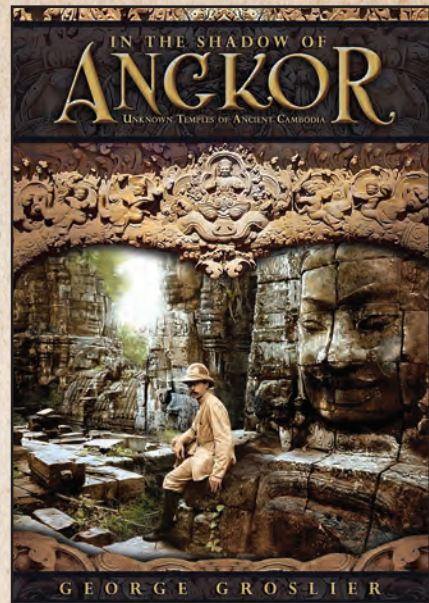
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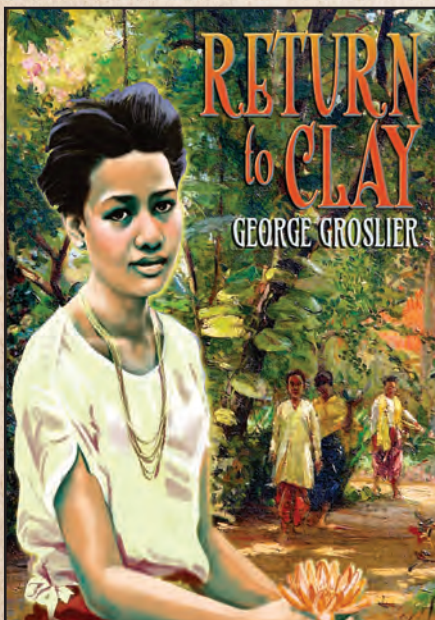
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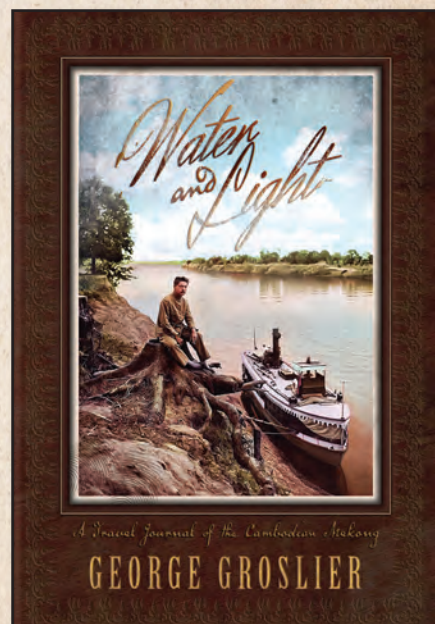
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THE ROAD OF THE STRONG

A ROMANCE OF COLONIAL CAMBODIA

In his first novel, George Groslier glorifies the colonizing power of France, while celebrating a Khmer art of living. His protagonist, Résident Ternier, lives his life in devotion to his mission, to the roads that link beings, bring villages into the world, open up economies, and guarantee security and peace.

Professor Henri COPIN - Foreword

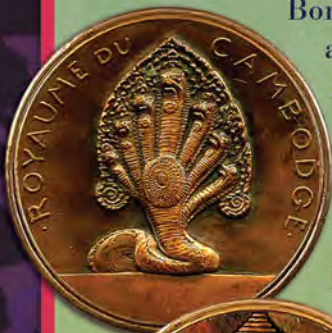
A chance encounter on a French country road irrevocably intertwines the fate of Pierre Ternier — a colonial administrator visiting from Cambodia — with successful car manufacturer Roland Gassin and his wife Hélène. When Ternier learns the Gassins are headed to French Indochina to explore manufacturing their cars, he extends an invitation to visit him in Cambodia.

As Roland concludes their business in Vietnam, Hélène is the first to arrive in the rural Cambodian province of Battambang, where Ternier's primary duties are constructing and repairing the Protectorate's rapidly expanding road network. Through Ternier's warm hospitality, Hélène is immersed in the rural lifestyle and Khmer culture, as she is charmed by the friendly natives. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that Hélène is a woman with a secret...a secret that would change all of their lives forever.



Born in Cambodia in 1887, George GROSLIER redefined the art, architecture, history and literature of his beloved birthplace. Here, in its first English translation, Groslier gives readers a candid and intimate look at life in early 20th century colonial French Indochina.

This edition includes an insightful foreword by Professor Henri Copin, supplemental materials, the original French text, publisher's notes, and a 75-page feature article by Tom Kramer: "Colonial Battambang Today — Revisiting George Groslier's Setting for *The Road of the Strong*."



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