

Laos and the Hilltribes of Indochina

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Harmand F. J.

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much further and meeting with it pleasantly surprises me. The village of Phou Wa consists of only a few huts which sit with their backs against a vertical mountain which has given it its name. A narrow valley separates this mountain from one of the extensions of the chain of Lakon: it is through this way the Sé Bang Fay, which they say originates from a lake, escapes. They also say that its course is partly underground. I will try to shed light on these problems. The setting of the village, with the greenery of its gardens and the ribbon of naked mountains, with their serrated tops, cut out like the jaw of some fantastic carnivore, forms a landscape that is at the same time full of charm and of wildness. Phou Wa is inhabited by a confused mixture of Sô, Phou Thay and Lao.

In the evening, Tay, my Annamite, approaches the governor to ask him for men, or elephants or bullocks, as soon as possible. First they answer that it is impossible to give me men to go to the Annamites because the Kha who inhabit the intermediary regions are very dangerous, or as they tell me, *very wicked*. Finally, after endless shilly-shallying, the *khio-muong* makes up his mind and promises porters for the day after tomorrow.

Upon these good words, I send him the usual gifts and I sleep, intending to dream the sweetest dreams about the pleasures which are waiting for me soon, because, in fifteen days at the most, I hope to have concluded this wild existence of a wandering Jew.

3 June—Early in the morning I prepare myself to receive the visit of the authorities. These meetings, despite their monotony, possess a certain appeal: it is especially the look of the speakers that amuses me and each time I examine with a new curiosity all the efforts they make to give themselves a posture, to compose their face and spout their lies. But this particular meeting was to leave me perplexed. Indeed, the dispositions of the preceding evening, already mediocre, have been changed. After having ruminated, yesterday evening, deep into the night, with his coterie of small mandarins and the small chief of Lakon, after his reflections and his betel, the governor, who is nothing but an almost pure blood

We cross more or less devastated forests, growing on undulating terrain and three small Souë villages, before we reach the ricefields of Muong Phong which are already largely transplanted and which are beginning to be covered with soft greenery. Arriving in Phong, in the dusk of the evening, or rather when the tiger is almost on the prowl, I unofficially inform the governor (who can now not deny that he has toyed with me by hiding the existence of Muong Phin and the road that goes there) that, if he is so unlucky as to approach the pagoda to a distance within the reach of a bamboo stick, I will administer to him the harshest punishment he has ever received with my own hands; I must nevertheless assume that he has already received several which can count in his memory. He has heeded my advise and has not come to oblige me to keep my promise, which, I should say in passing, would have embarrassed and distressed me. Because in the end, far from reproaching him, I thanked God for his stupid defiance to which I owed my exploration of the Sé Bang Hicng. But in this country, it is good to act worse than one is in reality and to growl, for the smallest thing, without ever having the intention of biting.

5 July—It was a day of fever and rage. All the porters are going back and I am too sick to pursue them. They had the honesty to take only the small quantity of rice with them which they need for the return journey, and this is fortunate for my finances, because the indispensable cereal has reached a totally exorbitant price: they give me a small cylindrical basket, which does not contain more than five liters, for one *tical* (3.50 francs). There are big rain showers all day long.

6 July—The governor, no doubt ashamed of his past acts, shows a zeal worthy of the circumstances, and then my Annamites have told him. I assume, that when I have a fever they should not toy with me. Twenty-six men and an elephant are loaded with my luggage and my supplies and the rest of the gang carries rice and salt for their friends, because, this time, I do not want to be stopped by famine and, since they have announced vast, deserted areas or areas which have a general shortage, I have taken liberal precautions: a burnt child dreads the

