

Map of the hill routes between Pitsanuloke and Lomsak.

## Hill Routes Between Pitsanuloke

and

### Lomsak\*

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#### I

This journey, undertaken during January 1928 by Mr. R. W. Aston and myself, for lack of preparation was not a scientific expedition. Unfortunately, because the district is wild and unknown, and has only been very roughly surveyed. It might have been possible to obtain some interesting and valuable numerical details concerning the lie of the land, but our only instrument apart from a compass was a thermometer which came to an untimely end. The journey was rather an errand of justice. A British Shan subject of the Lomsak district was accused, with others, of gang robbery, and Mr. Aston was requested to go there to be present at his trial.

Lomsak is not at all an accessible place—and in the past at any rate it had a bad reputation. Mr. Warrington Smyth says "it is a district rich in minerals, but cursed by fever and dacoity." Geographically, it lies, together with Petchaboon some 40 miles to the south, in a long narrow valley enclosed by high hills to the east and west. The valley is shut in by the Loi hills to the north, and only open in a small gap to the south near Petchaboon where the Menam Sak flows out. In the rains it is possible to reach Lomsak by this river. The only flat land route is through Petchaboon, entering the gap in the hills by a track from Ban Bunnag near the northern railway line, and according to report this way is hot, uninteresting and a hunting grounds of dacoits. The only relatively direct routes are east from Pitsanuloke, crossing the hills which can sometimes be dimly seen from the railway; and these routes are two—one of them difficult but straight, and the other easier and more circuitous turning a little north through Nakon Thai. We went by the

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unfrequented straight route, much against the advice of government officials in Pitsanuloke, and returned by the Nakon Thai route.

We were able to make a fairly detailed sketch map of the country we passed through and this may be of help to any subsequent travellers. Also several very excellent centres for shooting were noted. There was a certain glamour about the journey, since according to the report of villagers we were the first Europeans ever to cross those hills.

## II

We left Bangkok on Christmas Day 1927 by the night train to the north, and arrived at Pitsanuloke the next morning some hours before a chilly dawn. Two days later the start was made. We had asked for our 25 conscripted carriers to be ready at 6 o'clock in the morning, but it was two hours later before the last of them turned up, and in consequence we had a tiring day in the heat of the sun over grass and low scrub plain. Elephants had originally been offered us, but in view of the difficult country and also the slowness of travelling by elephant we took ponies instead. The direction was due east of Pitsanuloke to the village of Wang Tong, in Ampur Pa Mak, some 15 miles away. On the way the only incident was the crossing of a marshy stream, where a number of old ladies punted us over—30 people and all the baggage—for the admirable sum of one tical. Wang Tong was the real beginning of the journey: here we picked up a fresh company of 25 carriers, cultivators conscripted in the district, to go with us all the way to Lomsak. We stayed the night in a large and well built temple *sala*, with a band of Laos who were returning to their villages after selling pigs in Pitsanuloke. Ban Wang Tong is close to a river the course of which we followed up for some days into the hills: it is locally known as the Kwae Wang Tong, (on the official survey map marked the Klong Ta Pua), and is a tributary of the Nan River, flowing into it just north of Pichit.

## III

The new carriers took up their loads and moved off at dawn: they looked and afterwards proved to be a very good lot of men.

Jokes and shouts were continually passing down the long straggling file of them. There were a few small villages near Ban Wang Tong: then the country became broken with the beginnings of forest. At Ban Nok En, famous for peacock, we took on the *kamnan* to be our guide — a taciturn old man who always wore a fur cap like a polar explorer. The route crossed several streams running in deep gullies, calling for a steep scramble down and up. The latter part of the morning we traversed light bamboo jungle by a rocky rising path. Wayfarers were few — a solitary gendarme, and a party of priests, even they carrying the universal and essential knife of the jungle. We camped for the day under a tangle of bamboo by the side of a rocky stream, Huey Kai, which close by had been dammed by a stout barrier of wood and earth to form a pleasant little lake.

## IV

The next morning Mr. Aston was feeling unwell, and decided to remain in camp for the day. The carriers were agreeably surprised by the news. The morning passed with a little shooting for the pot; but the many desirable imperial pigeons about perversely kept to the very highest trees. In the afternoon the *Kamnan* said there should be wild duck by the river, the Kwae Wang Tong, to the south of our camp. According to him the journey was only 30 sen but actually turned out to be over three miles. This is rather typical of the average country-man's amazing vagueness as regards distance: time too—he has no use for hours and only distinguishes between early morning, when the sun is going up, *wela paen* when the priests eat their last meal of the day about 11 o'clock, and afternoon when the sun goes down. There were no duck, but there was a wild and magnificent waterfall where the path met the river. A concave natural dam of rock, almost a perfect semi circle in shape blocked the river, which plunged down 40 or 50 feet in the middle of the curve. Below it broke up into a dozen swift channels, joining again half a mile away to reform the main stream which then flowed on through a thickly wooded valley. When we arrived a fresh water cormorant leisurely spearing fish from a rock was the only inhabitant—until he was stalked and shot. The river was alive with leaping fish.

Soon after leaving Huey Kai the next morning the foothills of the range ahead began. The track even at this early stage of the journey bore all the signs of being little used: over rocks where the hooves of our little ponies went clattering it was an indeterminate smudge, and in several stretches of tall girth-high grass (very pleasant in the cool of early morning) it was quite overgrown. We ate combined breakfast and tiffin by the side of a stream. The usual plan of march we followed was this: to be off at dawn and do four or five solid hours, with short rests, before breakfast-tiffin about 11; after that another two or three milder hours before camping for the day. Evening marches were avoided because of the difficulty of choosing a ground and setting up camp in the gathering darkness. This day, early in the afternoon we came to a wide stream which had to be forded unfortunately at the same time that a great herd of water buffaloes was crossing in the opposite direction. They with their mournful unintelligent eyes stared vacantly at us. We met other herds on succeeding days being driven in for sale at Pitsanuloke. The Lao herdsmen, very sturdy fellows, were well armed—some with bamboo cross-bows and the others with dangerous looking flint-lock guns. Shortly after we camped for the day on the bank of our river, the Kwae Wang Tong, close by the small village of Ban Pak Yang. The villagers, of the Korat Lao type, saw their first Europeans. As we rode in there was a general retirement into the houses from the shelter of which we were the subject of much peeping scrutiny. But a very small infant was left deserted in the middle of the compound; he gave one look and then ran away with a howl of terror. This thawed the social ice, and we found the people quickly friendly. Our beds and awning were pitched on a great flat rock by the village water place. Here the elders paid us a visit of inspection, the men very interested in our guns and electric torches, and the women in the varied contents of our baskets— one old lady wanted to taste a piece of soap until the cook told her she would die an untimely death. In the evening the maidens put flowers in their hair in our honour, long hair piled up in the Lao top knot, when they came down for water with pails and clusters of globular narrow



A party of Laos setting out to snare jungle fowl with a decoy cock in the small basket.



The path down the east side of the Khao Kayang.



necked pots. It was difficult to extract any definite information from the villagers about the route ahead: their radius of knowledge was only a few miles. The rainy season cuts them off from all communications for months at a time. They showed us flood marks high up on trees growing in the steep river banks, although then the river was shallow and running in rapids. It was quite impossible for navigation and the people had no boats. There was the low rumble of another waterfall in the distance, upstream. We were then probably quite 2,000 feet up, but the night was hot because a peak just ahead the Khao Kayang cut us off from the north-east wind.

## VI

The next morning the villagers with blankets round their shoulders were huddled over little fires as we passed through in the chilly hour before dawn. Going due east, we crossed over a high shoulder of the Khao Kayang. It rose up on our left to a long knife-edge crest thickly wooded to the top: the early sun brought out the colours of the leaves—bright reds and browns and yellows mottling the green colours lost in the glare of midday. The track was fairly open, going through tall feathery grass like small bamboo shoots. Here, and all along the route, there were occasional small groups of teak trees. We dropped down into a little cup in the hills, after passing a side track leading north to Nakon Thai, and came to the Kwae Wang Tong again and the village of Pooy, where we camped. The river here dropped in another fall of great beauty. It cascaded down in half a dozen places. Below the fall there were many deep pools, where the river tumbled through rapids, very refreshing for a plunge after the morning's march. The main stream here appeared to turn rather to the north—till now we had been going roughly parallel to it on its north bank—and the track went on straight across the fall.

This was December 31st, the last day of 1927. For New Year's Day we proposed a holiday—an arduous holiday in search of *krating*, the Asiatic bison. The *p'hu yai ban* of Pooy, a great hunter, was consulted, and promised to show us *krating* grounds on the far side of the Khao Kayang. At dusk I took a canoe, hol-



lowed from a single tree trunk, and paddled gently down the darkening river as the surrounding hill turned to indigo. In the feathered overhanging bamboos on the banks sleeping birds woke at the light splash of the paddle with disturbed cries and a flurry of wings.

## VII

The *krating* eluded us, though we had the barren satisfaction of seeing their tracks. It was a 14 hour day of walking, or rather pushing and stumbling, through wild trackless bamboo jungle; and the only wayfarers we met were a barking deer and a great black snake. But there was a consolation. At dawn we had climbed the steep southern slope of the Khao Kayang 4500 feet up. Through a break in the further hills a great stretch of country was spread out straight in the eye of the sun. There was the Lomsak valley, hidden in mist through which a thread of river showed, and past it, the distant hills edging the northern end of the Korat plateau. And all about the Khao Kayang were other rolling hills densely wooded to their crests like great waves on a green sea. It was a sudden glimpse of the wild heart of Siam.

After dinner that night we found that the carriers, who had been talking with the villagers during our absence, were rather alarmed at the prospect of the next two or three days' march if we kept to the original track, which went straight over the fall at Pooy. They said it was reported—none of them, not even the *kammuan* guide, had been further than this—they said it was reported that the track was overgrown and mountainous and infested with tigers, and now abandoned in favour of a more circuitous and slightly easier route. We had to rely on local aid, so a new guide from the village was taken on and with regret that wild sounding route was deserted.

## VIII

The roundabout way proved later to be wild and difficult enough. First, from Ban Pooy we struck north to north-east for some six or eight miles, finally losing our river the Kwae Wang Tong, before turning east again. A part of the track was over laterite and shadeless *pa koke* forest where all the trees seemed shrivelled up by the heat. But later going steadily up we struck

dense forest and frequent streams. With hardly a break this dense forest was with us for the next two days. Our camping ground was hacked out of thick undergrowth and surrounded by a primeval tangle of thick creepers. It was almost physically impossible to struggle more than a yard or two from the path, and the jungle came down like a wall a yard from the end of our beds.

## IX

It seemed that villages could only exist where there was a natural thinning of the forest. We passed two the next day: the first early on was Ban Sam Pak Peow where there were some 20 or 30 huts. It looked quite flourishing in spite of the isolation. Our men by a unanimous impulse downed their loads and bolted into the houses to buy tobacco and drink; it needed some persuasion to rout them out. The people were very shy of us. Breakfast later was in the bed of a rocky stream closely surrounded by great trees. Several parties of tailless monkey inspected us disapprovingly and moved away deliberately, and a greater hornbill croaked in the distance. Walking up the bed of a tributary stream away from the men we came suddenly on three extremely surprised small boys, who clutched their knives for a moment and then bolted. Close by was the second village, very tiny and poor looking, where—as indeed in most of the others—the villagers refused to sell us chickens to replenish our depleted larder. The chickens were much more valuable to them than satangs. Then followed what seemed at the time quite an epic adventure. We plunged suddenly into the densest jungle imaginable and went for hours without a glimpse of the sky in a green twilight. The track was cumbered with fallen trees and hanging creepers, and was tangled with huge stems of the giant bamboo crossing at all angles, as if a crazy giant had been practically investigating the theorems of a humorous and ultra modern geometry. In one or two places there was a musty smell in the air where some animal had passed. But we heard nothing: the still silence of the jungle was close about us, and the noise of our passage only seemed to accentuate it. The *harp* poles of the carriers were continually catching in the vegeta-

tion. Riding was impossible; and the ponies had to be pulled through openings and over four foot tree trunks. About three in the afternoon, after climbing up and down the channels of several waterless streams, we came to Huey Sai, where we camped in a tiny clearing on the bank. This was the wildest place, far from any village, hemmed in by great trees and matted undergrowth. The sandy edge of the stream was marked with fresh tiger tracks. That night the men did not spread far and made their fires in a compact red group.

## X

The next day's journey was a little easier. The thick jungle belt of the previous day was on the hill Khao San Keo and we were now descending its further slopes. A side track appeared which the guide said led to a Meo village, but this was too far away for investigation. These hills are probably about as far south as the Meo tribe ever come, though Mr. Graham mentions that in recent years they have begun to penetrate in this district from their more usual north-eastern territory. After a little stretch of once cultivated land, now thickly over-grown with a stubborn white-flowering bush, we passed a deserted village, Ban Khek Noi, with only the stark house posts standing up mournfully in the wilderness of undergrowth. Near here the path joined with the abandoned direct tract from Pooy. Then, quite suddenly, we emerged into an upland grass plain grown about with groves of tall pine trees. The day's march had been very short, but the scent of pines was so refreshing a change after the rank jungle smell of the last laborious days, that we made camp at once. It was cold in the evening, and rained a little, so a luxurious blazing fire of pine logs was made. If this place were accessible it would form a most admirable hill station. We guessed its height to be about 3000 to 3500 feet.

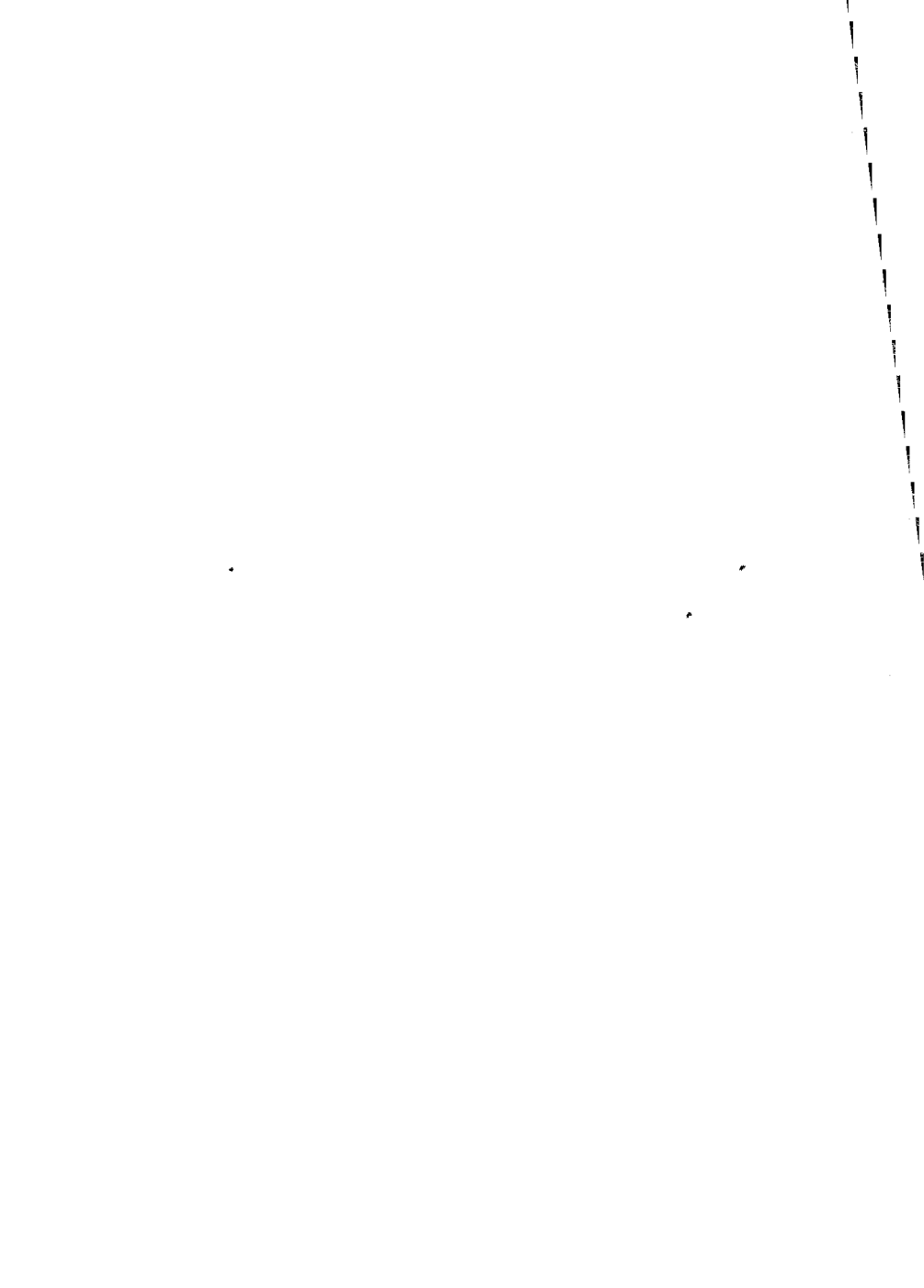
## XI

The next day we came to precipitous foot-hills edging the Lomsak valley. It was obvious that we were approaching comparative civilization again. The track broadened and became well worn, and villages began to appear — prosperous villages decently fenced. The first was Ban Nai Yao where there was a stream flowing be-



(above) A camp among pine trees on the Lomsak side of the hills.

(below) The hills looking east from the Lomsak valley.



tween very steep banks: the carriers crossed on an airy single plank bridge, but we on the ponies preferring fording to such a hazardous path nearly came to grief down the muddy banks wet from the previous night's rain. Followed Ban Tung Samor and a stretch of rice fields, and then a switchback of rocky hills. Looking back we saw the high range we had crossed with early morning clouds hiding the peaks; ahead and beneath us was the valley of Lomsak. After an arduous morning we reached Huey Larn, a winding gully with the track first on one bank and then on the other: in a few miles we crossed and recrossed forty times. But finally came the big village of Ban Huey Larn, where we stayed in the sala—our first roof for many days. In the evening we were objects of great interest to the villagers, who made demands on our slender medicine chest for various ailments. The local *khien* players provided a little concert in our honour, and received rewards of whisky according to their merits.

The next morning there were only a few miles of rice fields to Lomsak, where we stayed in the guest house of the Wild Tigers.

Of Lomsak, a quiet little up-country town, there is not much to say. Stevenson says somewhere "It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive," and our hopes had been fulfilled by the laborious journey. At present the town is quite cut off from the world by the surrounding hills; but one day when the railway reaches up through Petchaboon there may be a different story to tell. The valley is well cultivated and seems fertile: and among the hills is luscious grass all the year round which should make it an excellent cattle rearing country.

(Lantern slides of the route were then shown on the screen.)

## XII

Our return journey to Pitsanulok was by the more frequented route, officially a *Yang Luang*, northward through Nakon Thai. This, though not quite so wild and mountainous as the outward route, was in one way more interesting, since it gave a glimpse of typical wayfarers on a Siamese country high-way and of local traffic, shoulder borne, in various and diverse commodities.

## XIII

We left Lomsak in a motor bus, and went north some 15 miles along a bumpy road to old Lomsak, Lom Kao. At Lom Kao there are the ruins of a few old temples, but they are of no great architectural interest.

Here we took on fresh carriers, since our first men, all of whom were cultivators, had had to hurry back to their fields in the Pitsanuloke district to finish harvesting their rice. The track from Lom Kao turned north-west and after a stretch of paddy fields we were soon among the hills again. We passed an elephant hauling timber. Parties of blue clad Laos, men and women, were frequent: and at many places there were little provision shops, way side restaurants, which did profitable business with our big party. We camped by a stream, and in the evening shot doves and pigeons for the pot.

## XIV

The next morning the guide warned us that halts must be chosen with discretion since there were long stretches not crossed by any streams. This was true of the greater part of the way; in marked contrast to the outward route where there were streams every few miles. We heard the pleasant 'clock-clock' of pack cattle bells, and passed a long train, nearly a 100 head, going with empty baskets for salt to the famous wells north of Nakon Thai. There were constant parties of carriers returning with heavy loads of the salt. Often in these abrupt foot-hills, the slope is like the side of a house: it must be no pleasant task to labour up and down them with a burden of 40 or more pounds at each end of one's shoulder pole. The forest here was quite open, but close ahead was a thickly wooded hill, the Khao Sam-meun, a shoulder of which we went over the next morning. At many places were rough pig corrals made of bamboo. The pigs are driven in great herds through the forest, and the herdsmen have to be continuously watchful to prevent straying. At one recently used corral there were mystic symbols of white paper on posts to keep tigers or spirits away during the night.

## XV

The track rose steadily and it was soon obvious we were already some thousands of feet up from the "Spanish beards" of



(above) The waterfall at Ban Pooy on the Kwac Wang Tong.  
(below) A halt in thick jungle near Ban Pooy.