

CHANGES IN THE LAND OF A MILLION ELEPHANTS

By the CN Diplomatic Correspondent

They call Laos the Land of a Million Elephants—a land where, to Western eyes, strange things happen and nothing is quite what it seems.

Laos is a kingdom about the size of Britain but with a population of under three million. It is tucked away between Communist China and two countries, Cambodia and Vietnam, which, like Laos, were part of old French Indo-China.

Last month there was a military *coup d'état* or revolution in Laos, with the proclaimed object of achieving unity and honesty at home and neutrality in the world at large. It was carried out by a paratroop battalion led by a 30-year-old captain named Kong Lae, who used to be a Buddhist monk. Kong is a strict teetotaler and does not smoke opium as so many of his fellow-countrymen do.

Captain Kong more or less quietly took over the administrative capital of Vientiane while King Vathana along with his Prime Minister, Prince Somsanith, and members of the Government were supervising the last funeral rites of the King's father who died last year. All this was taking place in the royal capital of Luang Prabang about 100 miles from Vientiane.

Short struggle

The struggle in Vientiane went on for a couple of days without much fighting. Then Kong handed over control to another prince, Souvanna Phouma (who became Prime Minister) and went back cheerfully to his Army unit.

In any other country no doubt the overthrow of a government in this fashion would have caused civil war between the loyalists and rebels. But the King, a descendant of the great Khmers who ruled over a vast domain embracing Laos, Siam, and North Burma in the 15th century, accepted the situation. He dismissed Somsanith, and pardoned and recognised the rebel government.

Outside in the jungle with his followers lurks Prince Souphanouvong, the new premier's half-brother, who was captured by the



Captain Kong Lae

late government but managed to escape a few months ago. He is, perhaps, the only royal Communist in the world. We have not heard the last of him.

The Laotians, mostly Buddhists, are an enchanting people. About two-thirds of them are of Lao stock, a branch of the Thai (Siamese) race which migrated from China about a thousand years ago and set up their great gold Buddha in the temple at Luang Prabang.

Religious festivals

Their King is not only Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the army but also the supreme religious authority. Much time is given up to religious festivals in which cymbal-clashing monks in orange robes play a prominent part.

Another picturesque branch of the Laotian nation are the hill tribes, the Meo and the Yeo. They are a people of the mountains and are so used to the rare atmosphere of the heights that if they come down to lower-lying

country they become seriously ill.

Finally, there are the Kha, to whom Captain Kong Lae is related. They are a people who seem to have been washed up by the tides of advancing civilisation and left high and dry in the southern hills. Their ancestors were cannibals not very long ago. They have a deep-rooted belief that trees and other apparently inanimate things are alive and have souls.

Politically, the history of Laos, like that of the Indo-China countries in general, is one of warring tribes seeking to dominate others; of the theft of Buddhist idols; of forays to recapture them; and many elephant raids and punitive expeditions.

Something like peace came to the country with the French-Siamese treaty of 1893, when Laos came under French protection. But times change. Sixty years later, spurred on by Communists, the people of Indo-China threw off the French influence and France left Indo-China in 1954.

Weather in September

O sweet September, thy first breezes bring

The dry leaf's rustle and the squirrel's laughter.

September is the principal harvest month in our country, and for this reason September weather has always been an all-important topic. "Fair on the First of September, fair for the rest of the month," said the old weather prophets; and a bright, sunny day for the month's beginning was certainly hailed with joy by country people.

Some of the old weather lore is surprisingly accurate.

*Pimpernel, pimpernel, tell me, pray,
Will the weather be wet or fine today?*

runs one old rhyme, and the tiny red flowers will give an answer. If they are open, one may be reasonably sure of at least an hour's fine weather; if they are shut, then rain is on the way.

*Red sky at night
Is shepherd's delight:
Red sky at morning,
Is shepherd's warning.*

is another fairly reliable old piece of weather advice.

Spiders' webs, too, are held to be a fair indication of weather prospects. When, on an early September morning, webs are abundant on the ground and in the hedges, a fine, warm day can be expected. Hence the rhyme: *Spiders' webs a-flying,
Means they'll soon be drying.*

Nowadays, of course, scientists study the weather and make accurate forecasts that are available to us all; but there is still many a countryman who relies on his own experience and observation.

NEWS FROM EVERYWHERE

BRAVE BOY

The gallantry certificate of the Royal Humane Society has been awarded to 12-year-old Barry Roberts of Offord Cluny, Huntingdonshire. Although partly crippled, he plunged into the River Ouse to save another boy.

In a recent children's fishing competition on Deal pier, ten-year-old Stephen Foster caught a lobster two feet four inches long and weighing nine pounds five ounces.

LIFEBOAT SAVES LIFEBOAT

A woman and two men used a mirror to signal for help when their converted lifeboat sprung a leak after striking a submerged oil-drum off Guernsey. All three were rescued by the island's lifeboat.

The world's biggest indoor car park is to be built at the Austin Motor Company's Birmingham works. Nine stories high, it will have room for 3,300 cars, mainly new ones awaiting despatch.

More than 500,000 young plaice from shore hatcheries are to be put into the North Sea, in order to increase the catches in a few years' time.

Caving is his hobby



Exploring caves is the exciting hobby of Julian Fortnum, young research technician of Cookham, Buckinghamshire. We see him fixing his breathing apparatus before descending a big cave in Wales.

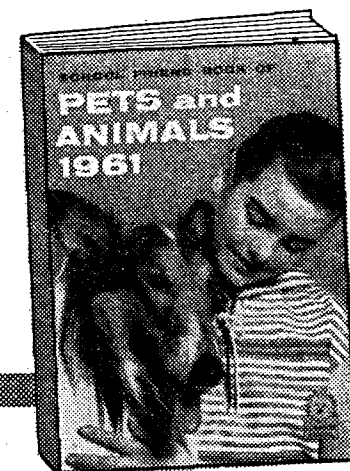
Babies' Castle, a Dr. Barnardo home at Hawkhurst, Kent, has received an anonymous parcel containing £1,000 in notes.

People in Moscow can now get coffee and a hot bun from street slot machines.

THEY SAY...

UPSTAIRS to the Underground.
Notice near London Bridge Stat.cn

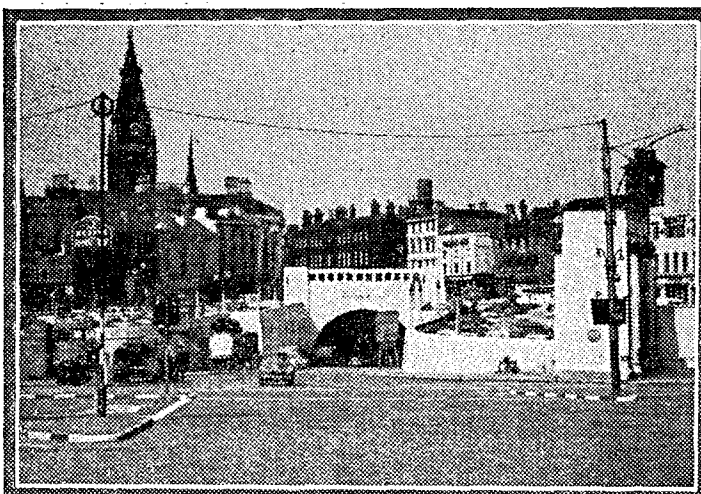
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