

UNIT II

LIFE IN VIENTIANE

David had much to learn about his new home. The climate was warmer than at home. He needed summer clothes all of the time. There were many fruits and vegetables for him to try. The language and customs were strange.

PURE WATER AND PURE FOOD

One of the first things David learned was that it was not safe to drink water directly from the water tap. Instead all water had to be boiled before it was safe to drink.

BOILING THE WATER

One morning David watched Dary as she boiled the water. She filled a large kettle with water boil for 20 minutes. Then she poured it into a large container and covered it. After the water had cooled, she put it in bottles and stored it in the refrigerator.

David's mother explained that the water was boiled because it was not pure, "The water we use at home is piped from deep wells, rivers, or lakes to a plant where it is purified. To do this, chemicals are put in to kill all harmful bacteria in the water. Bacteria are very tiny plants that live in all kinds of matter and often cause disease. The water is then piped into homes and it is safe to drink. Purifying the water and piping it long distances are expensive. Most of the countries of Aisa cannot afford to do this.

"There is always a chance for water to be impure when a river, lake, or open pool is used both for drinking water and for washing. If people who have some kind of disease bathe in the river, the water becomes impure. Then other people who use the water may also become sick. Many people here do not have enough education to understand such things, but they are beginning to learn."

PREPARING THE VEGETABLES

"Most vegetables require attention," Mrs. Baldwn continued, "before they can safely be eaten raw. Dary washes them in soap and boiled water. Then she soaks them in special solution to kill the germs. They can then be eaten raw. Of course, fruits like bananas and oranges, which are peeled, are quite safe."

A LAO MEAL

David liked to watch Dary cook for her family. Every afternoon she put some rice to soak in a pan of water. The next morning she poured the rice into a basket and hung it over a pot of slowly boiling water. When the rice was tender, she put it in a smaller basket and covered it. Later, she prepared the food that Noi bought each morning at the market. He often brought interesting greens such as mint leaves and water-lily pads. He also brought garlic, onion, and tiny red peppers. Among his purchases would be a small piece of beef or pork and perhaps some small fresh or dried whole fish. The meat or fish was usually wrapped in a large palm leaf and tied with a piece of tough grass.

The cooking was done outside on a covered porch back of the house. There was a small grill made of clay in which charcoal was burned for the fire. Sometimes Dary would wrap the fish or meat in a banana leaf, pulled from a banana plant in the yard. She then baked it in the hot charcoal while the vegetables cooked in a pot on top of the grill.

When the food was cooked, Noi and Dary sat down on the porch floor to eat. They used no knives, forks, or spoons. Instead each formed a little sticky ball of rice in one hand and used it to sop up the meat and vegetables.

One day Dary filled a little bowl of meat and vegetables for David and showed him how to eat it with the rice. At the first bite the tears sprang to David's eyes. The little red peppers were so hot and strong that his mouth and throat burned for at least a half hour. But Noi and Dary were used to the hot taste and enjoy it very much.

DAILY LIFE IN VIENTIANE

David learned that work began early in Vientiane. People rose very early to get as much done as possible before it began to get hot.

A TYPICAL DAY

Mr. Baldwin got up each morning at six thirty. He ate breakfast and was on his way to the school before eight o'clock. David's mother read and wrote letters to friends at home. David played and explored the neighborhood. After preparing and serving breakfast, Noi and Dary did their house and garden work. Then they served lunch to David and his mother. When lunch was cleared away, they stretched out on the back porch and dozed for an hour. This was the hot part of the day. David's mother rested in her room, and David often napped.

Shopkeepers closed their shops at lunch time. There were few people on the streets. Vientiane became a very quiet place. In the late afternoon the shops were opened again, and the streets were busy. The evening meal was very late, David thought.

One morning at breakfast Mr. Baldwin invited David to visit the National Education Center, where he worked. David was glad to go. He wondered if the school was like the university where his father had taught at home.

"Is it very far?" asked David.

"No," said his father. "It is only about four miles from our home."

David and his father left the house and got into the car. David thought he would enjoy the early morning drive.

David asked, "Who is that man in the long robe?"

"He is a Buddhist monk," replied Mr. Baldwin. "You will probably see many monks on the street at this hour. The people who live along this street will give them food."

BEGGING FOOD

"There are three more monks," said David. He pointed to three figures in bright orange robes, who were walking slowly down the road.

"Yes," said his father. "They are from the wat near our house."

David now saw several women at the side of the road with large dishes of food. As the monks came closer, the women knelt down. Then David noticed that each monk carried, partly hidden by his robe, a bag hanging on his arm. As he came up to the women, he extended the bag and each woman put some food in it.

"There is a bowl in the bag," David's father explained.

"When the monks get back to the wat, the food is separated. They all get share."

"It seems pretty messy to pile all that food in there together. I don't think I should like to eat it," said David.

"Well, you mix your food sometimes, too. You put gravy on your mashed potatoes and chocolate sauce on your ice cream, don't you?"

David agreed. But somehow he still felt he wouldn't like to eat the food in the monk's bowl.

"A minute ago you spoke about the wat near our house. Is wat the Lao name for church?" asked David.

THE STORY OF BUDDHA

"Well, church is the name given to Christian places of worship. But most Lao are Buddhists. This means they are followers of Buddha. In Laos places of worship are called wats. Buddhism is a religion that is older than Christianity. The founder of Buddhism, whose name was Siddhartha Gautama, was born a Hindu. Hinduism is an ancient religion that is practiced in India. Gautama was not satisfied with his religion, just as Jesus, a Jew, was not satisfied with his.

"Was he born in Laos?" asked David.

"No," said his father. "He was born in a small town in the Asian country now called Nepal. He belonged to a high caste, or place in Indian life. His father was a rajah, or Indian prince. As Gautama grew to manhood, he was disturbed at the sorrow and suffering of the poor. He wanted to help them, but he did not know how. But he felt that he could no longer live as a rich man in palace.

"At the age of 29 Gautama left his home and family. He lived as a beggar, wandering from place to place. He thought deeply about life as he tried to find the answer to its problems. One day, as he sat in the cool shade of a tree, the answer that he sought came to him. He felt a deep peace.

"Gautama gathered disciples and traveled over India, sharing the truths that he had found. He taught that one can be free of suffering only through self-sacrifice and through giving up all possessions. That is why Buddhists go about as beggars."

SOME BUDDHIST BELIEFS

As David listened to his father's explanation, he watched the monks receiving food offerings. He was silent for sometime. Then he said, "Dad, the monks don't look at the food gifts. I don't think they even say 'thank you'."

"That's right," replied his father. "The Buddhist believes in, and actually lives for, his life after death. The monks know that the people who give believe that it will assure them a good life after death. They hope that their next reincarnation will be in a higher form of life."

"What in the world is that?" asked David.

"Reincarnation means to be born again after death. Buddhists believe that by giving to the monks they will win a better place in the next life. This is difficult for Westerners to understand. Most of us believe that getting an education, holding a good job, and acquiring

property are good. But the Buddhists all remember that when they die they cannot take anything with them. However, they believe that they will be sure of a good life hereafter if they give to the monks and the wat now. It is the duty of each person to give. Every person is responsible for himself."

David was very quiet. His father could see that he had questions. So he added, "Perhaps Mr. Oudone will tell us more about Buddhism. Also you can visit the wat near our house. People go there every day to listen to the monks and to worship. But look! Here we are at the school."

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION CENTER

They turned off the street on to a fine wide road. David could see many large buildings among the trees and on the spacious grounds.

TRAINING TEACHERS

"This is the National Education Center," said his father. "It is to help teachers learn to teach. The United States helps by sending teachers and people who direct the schools and write needed textbooks. A short time ago there were no textbooks for any kind in Laos."

"Most of the buildings look new," said David, "but I don't see any pupils except those little children over there."

"The students who are learning to be teachers are all in class right now. Those young children are elementary-school children who go to the demonstration school. In the demonstration school the student teachers have a chance to teach young children helped by older teachers here. In this way, before they graduate they gain valuable teaching experience.

"Many of the buildings are new. They have been built with money from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Our government is lending a helping hand to developing countries like Laos. To progress in the world today, all countries must have educated people. This means that they must have good teachers."

"Oh, look!" cried David. "Here is a chicken yard. Does the school have a farm?"

"Yes. The school has a farm where vegetables, chickens, and geese are raised. Eventually, we hope that the center will raise all its own food. Then it will not be so expensive to run. Many of the students come from the country, so they live and eat at the school. In addition to the school farm all students have a small plot of ground of their own where they learn to raise vegetables. This will help them to teach others to garden when they go back to the country."

"I don't think all our teachers at home know about farming," said David.

THE VILLAGE TEACHER'S TASK

"No, they don't, David. But the situation is different there. Our farmers at home raise great quantities of food because they have modern machinery and fine fertilizers to enrich the ground. Trucks and trains carry the food to towns and cities, where people can buy it. In Laos it is different. Much of the country is covered by forests and by mountains. There are few roads and no railroads. For this reason, each little village has to be able to supply its own needs.

"When the students graduate from the school here, most of them will go to the villages to teach in the schools. They will be able to show the villagers how to raise more food and to build better houses. Often the teacher is the only educated person in the village. As an educated person, he must be a leader in practical ways. For example, he may need to know how to dig a well that will supply pure water and to build a toilet with a safe drainage. So these students, who go out as teachers, will not only be able to teach the villagers to read. They will also know some carpentry for building, some farming methods, first aid for the injured, and so on. Their job is to help the village people improve their whole way of life."

"That's a lot to learn," said David.

"Yes, indeed," replied his father, "but this kind of help is really well adapted to the way of life here. First of all, the Lao is a Buddhist, who believes that each man is responsible for himself. Second, because of the mountains, many villages are separated from the rest of the country. The people in these villages know that they must raise or make the things they need. They must have many skills if they are to survive. Third, it may truly be said that the rains control the life of the Lao. If the rain is too early, crops may be washed away. If it is too late, the crops may dry up and die. If we are to help these people have a better life, we must help them live in their country as it is."

David enjoyed walking around the school grounds. He saw some classrooms that looked very much like those in the United States. He met some of the teachers. Nearly all of the Lao teachers could speak to David in English. He could see that the teachers were very proud of the school. And he, too, was proud because his own country was helping in a fine project.

LIFE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Baldwin house was not on a main road. Instead, it was on a little lane. On this lane were six small houses made of woven palm leaves and bamboo. There were two others built half of concrete and half of wood. All these houses were occupied by Lao families.

Back of the Baldwin house were rice fields made up of many small plots divided by little raised dikes. When David and his mother arrived in Laos, the rains were just beginning. The rice fields were deserted and brown. With the rain, however, the fields began to turn green. There was also a chorus of frogs from the fields. It was almost like early spring back in the United States when the "peepers" would begin. Then everyone knew that spring was on the way.

A NEW FRIEND

One afternoon Mr. Oudone and his son Somsak came to see the Baldwin family. Both David and Somsak were glad to meet, but they really couldn't say much to each other. Because Somsak knew a few English words, he could understand some things David said. David decided to learn to speak Lao as soon as possible.

David and Somsak met some of the boys who lived in the next house. Soon they were playing volley ball just the way David played it back home.

THE WATER BUFFALO

When Mr. Oudone and Somsak were ready to leave, they had to wait in the small lane until two big water buffaloes passed by. Riding each buffalo was a small boy, younger and smaller than either Somsak or David. Up until now, David had seen water buffaloes only in pictures. They were huge beasts, larger than cattle. They were gray and plodded along very slowly. They had horns which curled backward and upward.

"Well," said David's mother, "these are ver large animals. I should think it might be dangerous for those small boys to handle them."

"It does look that way," said Mr. Oudone, "but the buffalo is ver patient. He is obedient, too. Many buffaloes in Laos are handled by small boys. In farm families caring for buffalo is the chore of one of the small boys. The animal is almost one of the family, and the boy takes good care of him."

"Are buffaloes used for food as our beef cattle are?" asked David's father.

"Oh, no!" said Mr. Oudone. "Not usually. They are too valuable for farm work. Most Lao farmers would be lost without their buffalo to do their plowing."

"Does every farmer have a buffalo?" asked David.

"No," replied Mr. Oudone, "but those who do often rent their buffaloes to those who do not. The buffaloes you see here have just been plowing the rice fields behind your house. Now they are being taken home. Tomorrow they will plow in another area."

"I should like to watch," said David.

"You'll have to get up very early," said Mr. Oudone, smiling. "They start working as soon as there is enough light to see by."

The next morning David got up when he heard Dary in the Kitchen. He was pleased and surprised to find Somsak outside waiting for him. The boys ate a little rice and then walked across the rice field to the farm corner. One of the two buffalo boys whom they had seen yesterday was busy with a basket. He was catching tiny fish in the muddy ditch at the edge of the rice field. It had rained hard the night before, and the muddy water contained tiny fish and small crabs.

An older man was guiding the buffalo, hitched to a small wooden plow. The mud was nearly to the man's knees, and the buffalo moved slowly.

David and Somsak watched for nearly an hour. It was getting warmer every minute. Suddenly, the man called to the boy and loosened the plow. Then the boy and the buffalo jumped into the muddy ditch. Soon all that could be seen of the buffalo was his eyes and nose. He was certainly cooling off. After a few minutes the buffalo came up, and the boy began plastering him with mud. He put mud all over the buffalo's body. By the time Somsak and David started home, the buffalo was plowing again. But now he was coated with mud.

Back at the Baldwin home, the boys found their fathers there. David asked about the buffalo's mud bath. Mr. Oudone explained that the water buffalo's needs special attention in the heat. He has to get into the water frequently. When he is out in the hot sun for a long time, coating his skin with mud helps to keep him comfortable.

"Caring for the buffalo is almost a full-time job for small boys," said Mr. Oudone.

"Don't the boys go to school?" asked David.

"In Laos each member of the family has his own work to do. The buffalo boy has an important job because without the buffalo the rice field could not be plowed. And rice is the main food in this country. Without rice we could not live. We want our children to go to school. They should be able to read and write and know something about their country. But the family work must be done. Perhaps this boy has a younger brother who will soon learn to care for the buffalo. Then he can go to school but take up some family task which can be done outside of school hours. Now come with me. I will show you a Lao home. This will help you understand our people better."

VISITING A NEIGHBORHOOD HOME

Down the lane they stopped at one of the houses made of split woven bamboo. The house was built on stilts about eight feet high to keep it dry during the rains.

OUTSIDE THE HOUSE

A young woman working in a small garden beside the house came forward. She smiled as she spoke to Mr. Oudone. David and his parents greeted her in the Lao style.

"This is the mother of the little boy you saw this morning. He and his father will soon be coming back to eat. She will prepare food for them. Later in the day, when it is cooler, they will go back and work in the field until it is dark."

HULLING THE RICE

"Look," said David's mother. "What is that basket for?"

"That is where the rice is stored," said Mr. Oudone.

"And in this bowl is where the rice is hulled." Mr. Oudone pointed to a large log attached to the rafters of the house. Beneath it was sturdy bowl made from the trunk of a tree.

Mr. Oudone went to the large storage basket and picked up a handful of rice. The rice looked like brown seeds. He said, "We don't eat the hulls of the rice grains. To remove the hulls, we put the grains of rice in the wooden bowl, raise this wooden plank, and then drop it on the rice many times. When the plank hits, it loosens the hulls from the rice kernels. Then, with these flat baskets, the housewife tosses the grains into the air and catches them again. The broken hulls are carried away by the breeze. The rice kernels are left, but they are not completely white."

"Brown rice is said to be a better food than white rice," remarked David's mother.

"Yes," said Mr. Oudone. "Actually, we, in Laos, are rather lucky. We still depend on this old way of removing the hull. This means that a little of the hull, which contains important vitamins and minerals, remains on the rice. Since our methods is not as thorough as when machines remove the hulls, our rice keeps some of its important food qualities. It is really better that we do it in the old way!"

SPINNING AND WEAVING

Mrs. Baldwin called attention to a loom in one corner. "Our Lao housewife weaves the cloth for the family clothing," said Mr. Oudone. "She uses this loom for weaving. After that she makes the cloth into garments. Some housewives also have a spinning wheel, where they spin silk or cotton thread."

INSIDE THE HOUSE

Two stairways led up to the living area of the house. Actually, they were more like ladders than stairs. The stairs at the front of the house opened on a long, covered veranda. Back of the veranda was a large living room. Beside one of the pillars a small statue of Buddha sat on a little shelf. The ladder at the back of the house opened onto a small porch. On the floor was a flat box of sand which held a small stove. The stove was just like the one Noi and Dary used. Close by, there were shelves with a few pots and pans. At the foot of the stairs was a large stone jar.

"What is the large stone jar for?" asked David.

"That is for water, David," said Mr. Oudone. "nearly all Lao village houses have such jars because most families do not have wells of their own. In this neighborhood most of them get their water from the well at the wat across the street. Boys and girls go there to get water.

"In Los each member of the family must do his part of work. The garden must be planted and tended. The food must be gathered and cooked. Water and fuel must be brought. House and clothing must be kept clean. Added to their own food, each Lao family must provide enough food to share with the monks at the wat. One must give to the wat in order to earn merit in the next life."

Mr. Oudone, Somsak, David, and his parents now said good-bye. They had enjoyed their visit to a Lao house. Soon after this Mr. Oudone said that he and Somsak must be going home. They promised to come back soon.

SHOPPING IN VIENTIANE

David and his mother decided that they would like to go to the market. In Vientiane, as in most cities in Laos, there is a market to which farmers bring their produce each day.

THE MORNING MARKET

David and his mother left home early in the morning while it was still cool. They walked up the little lane to the street. David had already ridden in a samlor with Somsak, so he called to the samlor driver. By using his hands and fingers, he arranged a price just as he had seen Somsak do.

Most people in Laos are not as large as Americans, David's mother found the samlor seat a little smaller than she expected. But they both enjoy the ride.

"Because this market is open only in the morning, it is called the morning market. All the people come early," said his mother.

"It seems strange to have to shop only at a certain time," remarked David.

"This is a very warm country, and most people don't have refrigerators. The shopkeepers don't have refrigerators either. So fresh meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables must be sold quickly before they spoil. A Vientiane housewife must shop early and then go right home and cook the food."

When they reached the market, they found it had a rood but was open at the sides. It had tables and booths outside, but the selling went on outside the market as well as inside. In the courtyard in front of the market sat the market women, displaying their produce. Most of the women had brought vegetables from their gardens. They had raised extra produce to sell at the market. Many sat under brightly colored umbrellas to keep off the sun. Many kinds of food were for sale in the outside market. There were eggs, peppers, dried beans, tobacco, watermelons, cucumbers, and greens. There were dried fish and noodles. There were even birds in cages. David thought it very interesting.

As they moved inside the market building, they found it cooler but crowded also. There were booths with the same kinds of fruits and vegetables they had seen outside. There were also dried mushrooms, ginger root, and all sorts of spices. One part of the market had meat and fish.

David's mother stopped in the part of the market where cloth was sold. She was amazed at the large selection of cloth shown. There were bolts of wool, cotton, and silk from many parts of the world. There were spools of thread, cards of buttons, and zippers. Other stalls sold baskets, trays, cooking pots, carving knives, nail polish, hair spray, and dark glasses. There were patent medicines from China, Vietnam, Thailand, Europe, and the United States.

"This is just like a supermarket," said David.

"It surely is," replied his mother. "Probably the main difference is the lack of a fixed price."

"A fixed price?" asked David.

"Yes. At home storekeepers put price tags on their articles, and the customer expects to pay the price on the tag. Here in Laos, however, as in most of Asia, there is no fixed price. Instead, the seller usually asks more than he expects to get. The customer knows this, so he offers a lower price. They discuss this, sometimes for a long time, before a price is agreed on. This is called bargaining. Even though I don't speak the language, I can still bargain pretty well. Most shopkeepers expect it."

"It's just like the samlor ride," said David.

"Speaking of samlors," said his mother, "let's hire one and go to the center of town where the stores are. I really have never shopped there, and I should like to look around."

IN DOWNTOWN VIENTIANE

In no time at all David and his mother were on their way. At length they stopped near a small restaurant which had tables under a canopy on the sidewalk. They decided to have a cold drink before beginning to shop.

Vientiane is not a big town, but it is the capital of Laos and its largest city. It has many shops. People from other countries live and do business there. The shops have signs in five different languages: Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese, French, and English. There are grocery stores, hardware stores, shoe stores, barber shops, and ladies' hair-dressers. There are also drug stores, bakeries, and tailor shops.

"I like the way all the shops are open to the street," said David. "It makes everything seem more friendly."

David and his mother browsed around in the shops for a while. Before they knew it, it was after ten o'clock and growing very warm. So they found a samlor and went home.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAT

Across the lane and up a little hill from David's house in Vientiane was a wat. David and his parents were very curious about the wat, but they had not yet visited it. Mr. Oudone had told them that they would be welcome. But David's father said they would wait until Mr. Oudone could go with them.

HOW WATS ARE BUILT

David's father had learned some things about wats. He said that "wat" is the Lao word for the while area in which the temple and other buildings stand. Within each wat, which is generally surrounded by a well, is the Buddhist temple and dormitories for the monks. Some wats also have a library and perhaps a guest house.

The wat in David's neighborhood was much like other wats in Vientiane. The temple itself had a steep roof of red tile. The roof was built in two stores. There was a high center peak and a lower peak over the entrance. At each peak and along the ridge pole were curved dragons' heads. On each side of the steps going into the temple were graceful stone dragons. The temple roof was supported by carved pillars, but there were no walls.

VISITING THE WAT

At last Mr. Oudone came to take David and his father to visit the wat. Somsak also came. The four of them walked across the lane and up the little hill to the wat.

Mr. Oudone stopped a very young monk. He was dressed in the orange robes that all Buddhist monks wear, and his scalp and eyebrows were shaved. Mr. Oudone spoke to the monk in Lao and asked him some questions.

"This little monk is the same age as you and Somsak," Mr. Oudone explained. "He is an orphan from the village here. The monks at the wat are responsible for him."

Soon one of the older monks approached them. Mr. Oudone and Somsak bowed their heads lower than usual. David and his father did the same. David could tell that this man was much respected.

"This is the abbot, the head of this wat," said Mr. Oudone.

The abbot greeted them in English and smiled kindly. David was surprised to hear him speak English so well. Later, his father told him that until recently the only education for Lao boys was the wat. At one time the monks were the best educated people in the country.

The abbot took his guests to the temple in the center of the area. To the left of the steps going into the building was a small shallow pool filled with water. Somsak, who was barefoot, washed his feet there. Mr. Oudone, David, and his father took off their shoes and left them on the steps. The abbot, who wore sandals, did the same. They all went into the temple.

In the center of the temple was a raised platform with three large statues of Buddha. These were smaller statues also. In front of the statues were several silver dishes filled with rice, flowers, candles, and long sticks of incense. The incense, when burned, would produce a fragrant odor. Hanging from the rafters of the temple were colored paper streamers. Along the sides of the temple were other images of Buddha. In front of some of these were flowers and candles that had burned low. Orangerobed monks sat on the floor and chanted. They did not notice the visitors.

The temple was not a very large building. The abbot explained that the wat and the monks were supported by the people of the community.

"The people of each community want their own wat. A wat gives them their best chance to earn merit for the life hereafter. This is a small village. Our people are hard-working farmers. No one here is rich, so our wat is small and simple, but the villagers are very sincere Buddhists,"

After walking around the temple, the visitors went outside. There they saw a large hollow wood gong. David had heard this gong many times early in the morning and in the evening. The abbot showed them where the monks lived. There were mats on the floor for sleeping. The abbot had a smaller house for himself. The whole wat had a peaceful air about it. Everything was neat and tidy. When the visitors said good-bye to the abbot, they thanked him.

THE PHI ALTAR

At the edge of the compound, David's father noticed a very small thatched house. It looked rather like a birdhouse on stilts. "What is that?" he asked.

"That is a small altar built for the phi of this area," replied Mr. Oudone.

"What is a phi?" asked David.

"It is a spirit. Many Lao believe that the phi exist all around us. They are in the forests, rivers, homes, in the human body, and, in fact, everywhere. One must be careful not to offend them, so it is important to give them gifts."

DUTIES OF THE MONKS

The four friends had now returned to the Baldwin home. As they enjoyed a cool drink, David's father asked about the duties of the monks.

"The monks lead a well-ordered life," said Mr. Oudone.

"There are rules of Buddhism they must follow. For example, they must not kill any living thing. They must not lie. They can have no money. They must not till the soil. They must not sleep too much, or eat too much, or eat anything after noontime.

"Each monk leads a busy life. He arises about five in the morning. After saying his prayers, he must be on his rounds to ask for food. He returns to the wat for a simple breakfast. Then he goes about his special duties. Some monks teach, other study. Others do needed chores around the wat. Just before noon, they eat again--the final meal of the day. After this they rest and think. In the late afternoon they take up their duties again."

"A monk is generally present at all funerals, marriages, and the naming of new babies. When sickness comes, monks are also called to prescribe medicine for the patient."

"Do these monks have medical training?" asked David's father.

"Not really," replied Mr. Oudone, "but they have learned a great deal about the use of herbs and plants as medicines. Their knowledge has been passed down for many years, and the village people have confidence in them. We also have village spirit doctors who practice healing."

"Don't the people use regular doctors?" asked David.

"Yes. Today they are beginning to consult doctors. But the Lao have many old customs. Sometimes a patient has a medical doctor, a monk, and a spirit doctor all taking care of him at the same time!"

It was now time for Mr. Oudone and Somsak to go home. In the days that followed David learned more about the wat. He and Somsak often went to the wat together. They sat quietly while the abbot told them stories about Buddha and helped David learn Lao.

ATTENDING A BACI

One day David's father came home with exciting news. He told David and his mother that they would be going to a baci the next evening.

"Is a baci for some special holiday?" asked David.

A BACI FOR A FRIEND

"No," said his father. "It is given to a person for a special reason, such as being promoted in a job, or taking a new job, or going on a journey. It is also given to a new mother, to people getting married, and for other reasons. This baci is for Mr. Davis, who works with Mr. Oudone and me at the school. He has been in Laos for four years and is now going home to the United States. His Lao friends will miss him very much. He speaks Lao well and has worked hard while he was here."

"Where will this baci be held?" inquired David's mother.

"It will be in the auditorium at the school. The teachers at the school are organizing it."

When the Baldwin family reached the auditorium, a big crowd was already there. Woven grass mats had been spread over a part of the auditorium floor, and people were sitting on the mats. They all had their shoes off. David and his parents took their shoes off, too, and sat down. In a moment Mr. Oudone and his family came in. David was glad to see Somsak, because he did not know many people there. When Mr. Davis came, he sat down in front of a low rattan table in the middle of the area. On the table was a large silver dish on a pedestal. On the dish, arranged like a pyramid, were different kinds of fruit, small cakes, pieces of sugar cane, and pieces of coconut. There were candles with sweet-smelling champac flowers tied to them. Pieces of heavy white cotton thread, about six inches long, had been twisted together and placed among the flowers and candles.

Across the table from Mr. Davis sat a man in a white jacket. After the candles were lit, the man in the white jacket began chanting. The people were paying close attention to him. David couldn't understand what he was singing, but he sat quietly. Some small children had come with their parents. They were all very quiet, and their parents seemed almost to forget they were there. One of Somsak's little sisters had gone to sleep on the floor.

The chanting went on for about a half hour. Then the man in white took thread from the silver dish and tied it around Mr. Davis's wrists. Before long, other people began to tie string around his wrists and also on the wrists of all the guests.

MUSIC AT THE BACI

Although the people were laughing and talking, David could hear music. It was not at all the kind of music he was accustomed to. The rhythm was different, and the sounds more sand. Just then Somsak spoke.

"Come on, David, let's watch," he said, leading David out to the veranda. The musicians were sitting crosslegged on the floor in a small circle. The boys sat down near them.

One man held a drum, shaped like a small barrel, across his lap. He played it by using his hands. The drum was a little like the one at the wat, only smaller. Another musician used small hammers to strike round metal gongs. There was also a stringed instrument rather like a violin. But the musician played it like a cello.

Somsak and David watched the musicians for a while. Then they caught sight of their parents near a refreshment table inside and joined them.

David noticed that Mr. Davis had many, many white strings on his wrists. He asked about this.

CALLING THE SPIRITS

"Well, David," said Mr. Oudone, "you remember the other day we spoke about spirits. This baci ceremony has to do with spirits. The Lao believe that the human body has guardian spirits. They believe there are 35 protecting spirits in each human body. There is one for nearly every part of the body. If a person is ill, it is because some of these protecting spirits have left the body."

"But Mr. Davis is alive and well," said David.

"He surely is," replied Mr. Oudone, "and all his friends want him to stay that way. Earlier you noticed a man in a white jacket who chanted. He has asked all of Mr. Davis's spirits to stay with him so that he will be strong, happy, and successful. He has blessed all the protective spirits so that they will carry out their task. He has offered them the sweet and fruits on the table in front of Mr. Davis."

"Let us now watch the dancing. They are dancing our national dance-- the lamvong."

DANCING THE LAMVONG

The lamvong is a slow dance in which people go around in a circle. The two partners do not touch each other. There are no difficult steps because the dance is done mostly with the hands. David was surprised to

see his mother in the group. She was doing the lamvong with Mr. Davis as a partner. She danced very well, David thought. He noticed that Madame Oudone and other mothers were also dancing. They had left their children dozing in a quiet corner while they joined in the dancing.

All too soon it was time to go. David and his parents said goodnight and started home. Sleepy little children stumbled after their parents. People talked happily.

"No wonder the Lao enjoy their parties so much," said David's mother. "Everyone can take part."

OTHER LAO CUSTOMS

One day not long after their arrival in Vientiane, David's mother took him to the American School. Here children of other Americans also went to school. It was not a large school, but the children and teachers were friendly. David soon felt at home. He was glad to be in school again.

LAO RELIGIONS

Outside of school David learned Lao. His mother and father were learning Lao, too. They all went to church on Sunday. David and Somsak often went to the wat together, and David was always welcome.

At church David was surprised to see many Lao attending. He asked his father about this.

"Mr. Oudone told us all Lao were not Buddhists," said his father. "Long ago Christian missionaries came here to teach their religion. Some of the Lao became Christians. But many more are Buddhists."

THE LAO WAY OF LIFE

Later Mr. Oudone explained that the peaceful attitude of Buddhism is a part of Lao life. "Even Lao children," he said, "are seldom forced to do things. They learn to work by watching their parents. When they are ready, they take up the duties themselves."

"If a boy doesn't like school, must he go?" asked David.

"Most of us don't insist that our children go unless they want to. But now things are changing. If our country is to take an important place in the world our people must be educated. Today some parents are being a little more firm about school. Only one person out of four can read and write in Laos. We want to improve this, but we cannot hurry the changes. It is difficult to give up old ways. In our own way we are making some changes."

A BOUN AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAT

David and Somsak learned there was to be a boun at the wat near David's house. Somsak was very excited. He told David that a boun was the most interesting thing he could think of.

"What is a boun?" asked David.

"Let's ask my father. He can explain it better than I can," said Somsak.

Mr. Oudone always took time to answer David's questions. "A boun is a kind of festival that all the Lao love," he replied. "We have bouns to celebrate the New Year, the water festival, the birth and death of Buddha, and many other religious events. Some parts of the country have their own special festivals. Here in Vientiane the most important one is the That Luang Festival."

"I know where That Luang is," said David proudly. "Somsak and I rode there on our bicycles. I didn't see any way of getting inside. It looks like a solid monument."

"No, you can't get inside, and it is a monument. That means a place where some important Buddhist relic from long ago is kept. For example, one That claims to have a tooth of Buddha. Another says it has a lock of his hair."

"What relic is inside That Luang?" asked David.

"I don't know, David. I don't think anyone knows what relic is there."

"What will the boun at our wat be celebrating?" asked David.

"Nothing really," said Mr. Oudone. "It is planned to raise money for the wat, perhaps to repair buildings."

"I think this is like our church fair at home," commented David.

Before the boun was held many things had to be done. The monks and the villagers cleared brush from the streets and put everything in order. They hung up colored paper banners to add a gay touch.

At last the great evening arrive! David and Somsak went early. They watched the peddlers with their wares as they moved through the crowd. They saw booths in which many articles were for sale. There were games of chance. Music came over loud speakers.

A large platform had been set up on empty oil drums. People, dressed in their best clothes, danced the lamvong there. David and Somsak sat on the ground and watched. Mr. Oudone came by and joined them.

The boun was held for three evenings. It lasted until three or four o'clock in the morning each time. Each evening David went to bed with the sound of Lao music in his ears. He was sure of one thing--that Lao love nothing better than a boun.