

A Pattern of Islands *by Arthur Grimble*

Part 5 - The Tiger Shark

Arthur Grimble has been stationed at the Colonial Office in the Gilbert & Ellice islands. The islands are spread over 500 miles of the Pacific ocean between Hawaii and New Zealand. He is currently on District Officer on the island of Tarawa with his wife Olivia and his young child. The year is 1916 and Grimble is learning how to fish island-style.

In my early fishing days at Tarawa, I got it into my mind that I wanted to get just one tababa or tiger shark of my own. I could not get the brutes to take any kind of trolled bait, so I had to fall back on the villagers' technique involving a one-man canoe, a twelve-inch hook and a club. When I announced my intention, my cook-boy immediately doubled up with laughter, and soon the other servants joined in. They clung to my arms, gurgling. "O, the Man of Matang....the Man of Matang, o-o!" but nobody would tell me exactly what the great joke was behind it all.

The next day, when we got to the sandspit where my little canoe lay waiting, it became clear that the whole village had been warned of the event. The beach was crawling with sightseers. I was wafted on to the canoe and pushed off in silence. I found this more than a little embarrassing but it was nothing to what followed.

Eighty yards offshore, I dropped the baited hook, made the line fast and, following instructions, set the canoe drifting beachwards with a paddle-stroke or two. I had hoped for a quick bite, but I was altogether unready for the quick success that came.

I was not yet settled back in my seat when the canoe took a shuddering leap backwards and my nose hit the foredeck. A roar went up from the crowd on the beach as I was drawn whizzing away from it on my face. I picked myself up and was in the act of sitting again when the shark reversed direction. The back of my head cracked down on the deck behind me. My legs flew up and my high-riding bottom was presented to the sightseers shooting at incredible speed towards them.

In the next fifteen minutes, without one pause, that shark contrived to jerk, twist or bounce from my body every ignoble posture of which a gangling frame is capable. The climax of its malice was in its last act. It floated belly up and allowed itself to be hauled alongside as if quite dead. I piloted it into the shallows where I tottered to my feet to deliver the coup-de-grace. But as the club swung down it flipped. I missed, hit the sea, somersaulted over its body, and stood on my head under water with my legs impotently flapping in the air.

This made the villagers roar with laughter. As I waded ashore, there was not a soul on his feet. The beach was a sea of rolling brown bodies, incapable of any sound but a deep laughter. I crept silently from their presence to the seclusion of my home. When my cook-boy was able to stand, he staggered back and told me the reason for the laughter. A Gilbertese youth is trained to sit a bucking canoe when very young and it takes him a year or so to master the technique. That was why the villagers had turned up expecting some innocent fun from me, and gone away fulfilled. But they killed the shark before leaving and that evening their chief brought along the liver as a reward for my cook-boy. A few days later, the jaws, beautifully dried and cleaned, were sent to me as a consolation prize.