

## **A Pattern of Islands** **By Arthur Grimble**

This is the story of Arthur Grimble and his time in the Gilbert and Ellice islands. In 1913 he was granted a cadetship to work for the Colonial Office in the islands which are spread over five hundred miles of the Pacific between New Zealand and Hawaii. Grimble describes himself as a tallish, pinkish, long-nosed young man, fantastically thin-legged and mild of manner, but with a passion for sea travel. After the interview for the post, he found out that he was the only one to apply for the job, but he refused to be deterred and on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1914 he set sail with his newly married wife Olivia.

### **Cricket Island style**

To begin with Ocean island was to be my base and a man called Edward Eliot was to be my boss. He was the Resident Commissioner for all the islands and the first thing he asked me was whether I played cricket. When I said I liked it, he replied, "Well that's one good thing anyhow!"

One Saturday, he told me to give my first cricket lesson to twenty-two of the local workers. At the end of the practice, which had not proved very enthusiastic, I asked them if they would like to try again some time. "Sir," replied their spokesman with courtesy, "we shall be happy to come, if that is your wish."

I explained to him that there was no enforcement, but put it to him that the game was a good game. I asked him if he thought so too? "Sir," he said "we do not wish to deceive you. It seems to us a very exhausting game. It makes our hearts die inside us."

After such a reply I naturally asked why, if that was the case, he had said they were willing to have another go. He answered at last "On account of the overtime pay which the Government will give us for playing on its ground."

Those early teaching days provided some problems of umpiring, and there was one case where I remember no decision was ever reached. The problem arose from a mismatching of partners. Ari, a little quick man, and Bobo, a vast and sluggish giant, were in together when Ari hit what he judged to be an easy two. He proceeded to run two, paying as usual, not the slightest heed to his partner's movements. But the gigantic Bobo ran only one, with the result that both players were at Ari's original end when the ball was thrown in.

However that was not the end of matters. The ball was overthrown upon which, Ari hurled himself onto Bobo and pushed his great mass to start a second run before Ari himself careered away on his third. Bobo finished his second, but by that time Ari was back at his original place (having finished his fourth run) he started on his fifth one. However he collided with Bobo, who was making heavy work of his third in mid-pitch. Bobo collapsed there, Ari on top of Bobo, and Ari's original wicket was thrown down.

The question was which one of the two was out? In point of fact, it was Bobo whom we sent back to the pavilion, but that was not an umpire's decision. Bobo was sent back because Ari's head had butted into his diaphragm and left him gasping for medical aid.

There was another case which was much discussed. A man called Abakuka was batting and he played a rising ball so that it span up his arm and, by some fluke,

lodged inside the yellow and purple shirt with which he was honouring our game. Swiftly the wicket-keeper darted forward and grappled with him, intending to seize the ball and so catch him out. After a severe struggle, Abakuka escaped and fled. The whole field gave chase and the fugitive, hampered by pads, was overtaken on the boundary. At that point they tried to retrieve the ball from his shirt-front by standing him on his head, but still he wouldn't let the ball go. Even though he was held by his feet, he resisted with such fury that it took all eleven members of the team to persuade the ball from his chest. After so gallant a fight, it would have been sad to judge him out. Fortunately we were saved the pain, as he was carried from the field on a stretcher.

### **Belching for your country**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed as a cadet for the Colonial Office in the Gilbert and Ellice islands. The islands are spread over 500 miles of the Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and Hawaii. In this episode he is based on Ocean Island with his boss, the Resident Commissioner, and has been taking lessons in the local language of Gilbertese.

Of course one of the big problems I saw in my job was understanding the local people and one of the first things I asked my boss on my arrival was if I could get lessons in Gilbertese from someone on the island. I worked hard at my Gilbertese, and in four months could make a crude show of talking it, but language wasn't everything and my boss decided that I should start learning about native customs as well. He told me to take lessons from the kaubure or the village headman. On the day arranged, I went to the kaubure's house in the village an hour or so before sunset.

When I got there a little golden girl of seven, naked except for some white flowers on her head, invited me into the hut. As she spread a fine guest-mat for me to sit upon, she told me her name was 'Movement-of-Clouds'. Seated cross-legged on another mat, she explained that her grandfather had told her to entertain me with conversation until he returned from fishing. He would not be very long now, she assured me, and would I like to drink a coconut while I was waiting? When I said yes, she climbed down from the hut, opened a nut under the trees outside with a cutlass-knife. And brought it in. She sat down again and offered it to me with her head a little bowed. "You shall be blessed," she murmured as I took it. I did say "Thank you" in reply, but that was all. I then swigged it back and handed it back empty, saying "Thank-you," again.

The girl sat with both arms clasping the nut to her little chest, examining me over the top of it.

"Alas!" she said at last in a shocked whisper. "Alas! Is that the manners of the young foreigner?"

She then explained that according to custom I should have returned her blessing word for word, and, after that, I should have returned the nut also, for her to take the first sip of courtesy before I drank from it. But that was not yet the full tale. My final discourtesy had been the crudest of all. In handing back the empty nut, I had omitted to belch aloud.

"How could I know when you did not belch," she said "that my food was sweet to you? See, this is how you should have done it!"

She held the nut towards me with both hands, her eyes fixed on mine, and

gave a belch so resonant that it seemed to shake her from stem to stern.

“That,” she finished, “is our idea of good manners,” and then she began to cry.

She was upset because this was the first time her grandfather had ever given her the responsibility to receive a guest of his and she felt she had failed to entertain me properly. But one redeeming course seemed still open: I begged her to give me another chance to show my manners when her grandfather returned, and luckily the idea appealed to her. On his arrival, she sat him on his mat, smiled at me and clambered down from the floor to fetch a nut for each of us. I made no mistakes that time; the volume of my final effort shocked me, but it pleased her grandfather profoundly and the girl slapped her hands in happiness.

I went back to write my report on my ‘lessons in etiquette’ which my boss had demanded. I wrote rather ‘fully’ about the coconut incident, under the heading “Honourable Eructation” and when I handed them to my boss he said he wanted to check up on this particular form of etiquette.

So, one day, we went together to the village headman’s house for an official try-out. In the village, a visit from the Resident Commissioner was a big event, and a lot of relatives were there. I found it all rather daunting and was worried that the presence of my boss might inhibit my output of good manners at the crucial moment. However when I heard the compromise of a noise my boss made on handing back his nut, like a politely frustrated hiccup, I felt that only I could save the name of the white men.

And indeed my effort was that of a champion. It astounded even our hosts. The little girl shrieked for joy and the rest were convulsed with a mixture of laughter and fulfilment. People from other houses came crowding round to share the joke and soon the whole village was rocking with my excess of good manners. But my chief was not so happy. I explained to him that it was just one of nature’s relieving accidents - the trick of an ailing stomach.

### **The tale of the little kitty**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed as a cadet for the Colonial Office in the Gilbert and Ellice islands. The islands are spread over 500 miles of the Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and Hawaii. In this episode he is based on Ocean Island with his boss, the Resident Commissioner, but he is soon to be sent on his first excursion.

It was in 1915 that my boss decided to send me on a recruit-ship so I might learn how the Gilbertese labour force was collected. Charles Workman was going to supervise recruiting operations and my function would be to act as doggie – that is, clerical assistant and odd-job-man. “The chief duty of a doggie,” observed my boss on my departure, “is to behave as little as possible like a pup.”

Charles Workman was a dashing giant of six feet five inches and a man of puckish humour. He loved to face people with situations, and I think my looks always tempted him to indulge this passion. The first job he gave me to do, however, had no connection with recruiting.

It was nearly midnight when Charles Workman called me to his quarters. We were anchored at the island of Tarawa, and as well as our ship there was also a small trading steamer in the lagoon. When I arrived to see Mr Workman, I found not only him but also the captain of this steamer who was sitting hunched up on the verandah floor, groaning.

“This drunken old sailor,” said Mr Workman “wants more liquor which I

refuse to allow.”

I nodded. I didn't know what else to do.

“But that is not his only complaint,” continued Mr Workman “Earlier today he was picked up and thrown overboard from his own ship by the second engineer.”

The captain began to relate his tale. It was difficult to extract the details, but I gathered that the second engineer was the terror of the ship – a man of gigantic size and demonic temper. According to the captain, everybody on board thought he was more than a bit mad. After he had flung the captain into the lagoon, the whole ship's company had fled ashore leaving this giant there alone, stamping the deserted decks.

“This,” said Mr. Workman, “cannot be tolerated for a moment ...not in my District. This second engineer must be apprehended and he must be haled before my court. And you my lad,” he added to me , “will effect the arrest.”

“What – me?” was all I could find to say at the moment.

“You,” he confirmed “...and you alone. Now, listen to me closely. You will proceed to the ship at 7 a.m. in the station bum-boat, rowed by a single native constable. You will go aboard alone. You will produce the accused in court before me at 8 a.m. precisely.”

The so-called bum-boat was in one of the canoe sheds. She was a rickety nine-foot dinghy and with the policeman and myself aboard, she took in a lot of water. A fresh wind was raising and the going was uncomfortable. However I got a little unexpected relief as we drew near the ship since there were several men walking about the boat-deck. “At least,” I thought, “the crew have returned. I shan't be quite, quite alone with this murderous maniac.”

But as we drew nearer, I could see a giant shape leaning over the rail by the ship's ladder. He was glowering down straight into my eyes. He had a most frightful walrus moustache. There could be no mistaking that he was my man.

“Are you William Clarence W-?” I heard myself asking. He heaved himself upright, to overhang me like a cliff, and replied in a growling bass that he was, and who the ‘blank’ might I be, if it wasn't too ‘blanky’ much to ask.

(In case you haven't realised, the word ‘blank’ stands for a swearword I dare not repeat).

After this little speech, I informed him with modesty about myself and added, “I hold a warrant to arrest you on a charge of criminal assault.”

He stepped back and stood glaring while I recited the usual warnings; then he spoke : “Well I never...spare me days....criminal assault....arrested....by *you* ? Here, gimme that ‘blanking’ paper.” He snatched the warrant from me. As he finished reading it, he emitted a bellow which brought the first mate running. I thought to myself, now for the trouble. But instead of attacking me he looked down into the dinghy, burst into a howl of laughter and said, “All right, I'll come quiet, you poor little pup.”

The whole ship's crew draped itself over the rail to watch us climb into the boat. “Now you all keep right out of this,” he bawled at them as he went down.

“You betcha life,” replied the first mate with a guffaw. They all guffawed. Of course they did. Everyone knew perfectly well what would happen with my prisoner, William Clarence's, vast weight in that miserable dinghy.

A hundred yards from the ship's side, we slowly sank, all sitting.

My prisoner took charge at once. It seemed he had it all planned in advance. “Leave the ‘blanky’ policeman to rescue the ‘blanky’ little boat,” he commanded “an' I'll look after you. You're not too good in the water, are you, son?” It was true. At that time I wasn't. “Hold on to yer old uncle,” he said when the going got really bad

and I did; I had begun to like the chap. His arm was round me for support when we walked into the court-house.

The court-house was a single-roomed building of native materials; but it had no furniture that morning save a kitchen table, two kitchen chairs, a portrait of Queen Victoria and a floor mat. Mr Workman, the man who had sent me on this quest, sat at the middle of the table with the captain at one end. Myself and William Clarence stood dripping together on the mat. "You are thirty-seven minutes late with your prisoner, Mr Grimble," said Mr Workman, taking not the least notice of either our soaked clothes or our affectionate attitude.

I groaned a few reasons, to which he replied "Ah" non-committally and read the charges.

"Not guilty," growled the accused, his arm still firmly around me.

"First witness for the prosecution," called Mr Workman, looking at the captain. But the captain was incapable of speech; it appeared that he had discovered another bottle of rum before Mr Workman got up that morning. He remained mute even when William Clarence called him a something something.

"Other witnesses?" said Mr Workman. The question was directed at me.

I reported that the entire ship's company was on board and seized on the occasion to enter upon a fuller story of the morning's events, but Mr Workman cut me short: "The court is aware of all the circumstances Mr Grimble. The court observed them through a telescope. The court is now waiting to know if you took any steps whatsoever to bring witnesses ashore with you."

"What..all of them or who, sir?.... what in?..... in that little bum of a boat?" I said feeling slightly angry at this point. William Clarence rewarded me with a hearty laugh.

Mr Workman turned to the captain who was still slumped on the table and asked: "Have you any other witnesses to produce before the verdict is considered?"

The captain raised his head, leered at the Bench, slipped from his seat, and sank paralysed to the floor.

"No witnesses, case dismissed, court adjourned. And now," Mr Workman turned a genial smile upon William Clarence, the former prisoner, "I have to thank you on behalf of His Majesty's Government for so nobly rescuing my young colleague from a watery grave. You will have leave of this court with honour. Having said that, may I venture to ask what you actually did, and why you did it, to this drunken old man? Quite off the record, you know."

"I threw the old 'blank' overboard," replied the trustful William "Because he kicked me kitty."

"Because he kicked your *what?*"

"Me kitty..... me little cat."

"And did he hurt her very greviously?"

"It ain't a her, it's a him, it's a little bull-cat." William's voice rumbled deeply tender on the word bull.

"Well, of course, that explains everything," said Mr Workman; "Now let's all go and have some breakfast."

### **A meal to remember**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed as a cadet for the Colonial Office in the Gilbert and Ellice islands. The islands are spread over 500 miles of the Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and Hawaii. In 1915 the Gilbert and Ellice islands were turned into a colony, but this made little difference to the workings of the Commission, in

fact more officials were sent to the headquarters on Ocean Island. To make room for these extra people, Grimble's boss sends him to the island of Tarawa to act as District Officer. As you can imagine food is scarce and Grimble and his wife have a special meal to prepare ....

It was early 1916 when I was sent to the islands of Tarawa to relieve one of my colleagues. I had passed my final language test some two months previously and my boss thought I was ready. We set sail towards the end of March. "We" by that time included Joan Ruth, aged eleven months, in addition to my wife Olivia and myself.

There was plenty of food on the islands but it was very different food. It was the vegetables that we missed the most and we had to make do with pumpkins, breadfruit and pawpaws, and that was only when they were in season. When they weren't in season we often had tinned food, but tinned goods in those days were not the same as they are now. With the honourable exceptions of asparagus and beetroot, the canned vegetables resembled nothing of their former selves. And since asparagus was scarce it was tinned beetroot that became a regular at our table.

It was some six months later when my boss, the Resident Commissioner, had to pay his obligatory visit. He was due to stay two days and a night, and on that evening we were expected to feed him. It was to be a meal we would all remember and a meal where the tinned beetroot made a guest appearance.

It all began with a quarrel in the back premises. About three hours before dinner our nursemaid Faasolo had discovered our cook, Sila, who was also her husband, talking alone behind the kitchen with a lady from the village and a jealous row ensued.

Faasolo was a gentle, smiling woman most days of the year and Sila had always seemed to us an exemplary husband. But when she saw him with this lady visitor she grabbed the lady by the hair and began flogging her with a broom-handle until we intervened. Fortunately, our formidable Chief was not there to hear her roars of rage or the screams of her victim. My boss had taken a stroll round the hospital and by the time he returned, the unwelcome girl was gone and Sila was doing his best to placate Faasolo.

But their making up could not last for long. Dinner had to be cooked – and what a dinner too! Our Chief had most kindly brought with him from Ocean Island an exquisite little shoulder of frozen lamb, *and* some onions, *and* some potatoes, *AND* a real tin of French petit pois. There was to be no tinned beetroot for this meal. Beyond which, to crown perfection, there was our plum pudding, tinned but delicious. It was intended to be hoarded for Christmas, but Olivia persuaded me to sacrifice it for the sake of the meal. The Chief liked a good sweet, she said, and she was right.

The joint was popped into the oven about an hour and a half before dinner, with Sila on guard.. Last instructions were given. We bathed, changed, had a final look at the dinner-table and passed out to the cool downstairs loggia where we relaxed a while with drinks beside us.

The hour after sunset was always the best for my boss. That evening, he was mellowed than I had ever seen him. He began to talk quietly about the rewards of living in the tropics, the relief of darkness and the night breeze after the day's glare.

"It makes you not want to return to civilisation," he said "There's something about all these big simplicities being enough for anyone, don't you think Grimble?"

I nodded, and as we took to our seats at the rose-lit dining table, I felt that we were all one together in this land that was no longer strange for any of us. And to top it all we had soup, roast lamb and plum pudding to look forward to.

I was lapping up the last spoonfuls of my soup when the cook, Sila, appeared at the door naked to the waist and in not a very clean state. He made no apology for intruding like that, but spoke in English, presumably in honour of our guest: "Missus, come quick!" he cried urgently. "Gravy, no bloody good!" and bolted back to the kitchen.

Olivia rushed wildly after him. My boss lit a cigarette and smoked quietly. I became aware of tension. I was tense myself. Gravy is important.

Looking back on it, I realize that Sila's report did little justice to the reality of the situation. For gravy to be good or bad there must be some of it, and in this case there was none at all. But he was not really to blame, and neither was Faasolo. She had come to the kitchen at seven 'o' clock intending to leave as soon as he filled her lamp. But her heart was bursting with heavy new thoughts about his lady visitor. She stayed to confide them to him. He paused in his work to reply. One thing led to the next; she went on, he went on. They lost themselves in each other, oblivious to all else until disaster fell upon them. It was the greasy fumes from the oven that told them what had happened. The shoulder of our little lamb was burned to a cinder and one cannot make gravy with ashes.

However the meal had to go on. We finished our gross substitutes for lamb and petit pois with little joy. My boss rose at the end and said he thought that that would be about enough for the evening. Olivia, I could see, was keen to let him go, and be damned to the plum pudding. But something in me rebelled at the total waste of that one remaining treasure. So, despite my wife's reproachful glances, I told him the history of it. In the end, I was glad I had done, because his temper visibly softened and he consented to stay on. We all sat down again.

There was a longish wait before the pudding arrived. Sila came along at last to explain the delay. His first attempt at sauce had gone wrong, so he had made another just as good.

"Well, well, better late than never!" observed my boss brightly when it was uncovered. "And, my word! What have we here? The sauce looks very handsome, I must say." And so it did, swimming crimson-red around the pudding.

"Yes, he good, Sah," volunteered Sila, "I makem myself. I boilem with plenty of sugar."

"Some kind of wine sauce eh?" My boss seemed to have recaptured his benevolence and I could see Olivia was glad now that I had got him to stay for dessert.

"No Sah," replied Sila, "he not wine – he juice. He beetroot juice outem tin." It was then that my boss walked out, and Olivia wept.

### **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.

### **The calling of the porpoise.**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed as a cadet to 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 the island of Tarawa with his wife Olivia and his young child. The year is 1916. In this episode Grimble investigates what he thinks to be a local myth.

It was common rumour in the Gilbert Islands that certain local clans had the power of porpoise-calling. But it was rather like the Indian rope-trick; you never met anyone who had actually witnessed the thing. If I had been a reasonably plump man I might never have come to see what I did. But I was skinny, and it was out of pity for my thinness that old Kitona, one of the villagers, set his family porpoise-caller to work. It all began when we were sitting together one evening in his canoe-shed by the beach, and old Kitona was delivering a kind of discourse on the beauty of fatness.

“A chief of chiefs,” he said, “is recognised by his shape. He is fleshy from head to foot, but his greatest flesh is his middle. When he sits, he is based like a mountain upon his sitting place; when he stands, he swells out in the midst, before and behind, like a porpoise. And you,” he said looking me up and down with affectionate realism “are in truth the skinniest white man ever seen in these islands.”

I laughed (heartily, I hoped) and asked what he thought could be done about that.

“You should eat porpoise-flesh,” he said simply “then you too would swell in the proper places.” That led me to inquire how I might come by a regular supply of the rare meat. The long and short of his reply was that his own kinsman in a nearby village seventeen miles up the lagoon, were the legendary porpoise-callers and his first cousin was a leading expert at the game. Apparently he could put himself into the right kind of dream on demand. When this happened his spirit could then go out of his body, seek out the porpoise in their home under the western horizon and invite them to dance. According to Kitiona, it was quite easy for one who knew the way of it. And according to him the porpoise never failed to arrive. Would I like some called for me? After some rather idle shilly-shallying, I admitted that I would. We fixed a day in early January, some weeks ahead, when we would travel to the village of the porpoise callers.

The sun was white-hot that day and it took over six hours of grim paddling in the canoe to reach our destination. By the time we got there I was cooked like a prawn and wrapped in gloom. When the fat friendly porpoise-calling chief came waddling down to the beach to greet me, I asked irritably when the porpoise would arrive. He said he would have to go into a dream first, but thought he could have them there for me by three or four ‘o’ clock.

“Please, though,” he added firmly, “Would I be careful to call them from now on, *only* ‘our friends from the west’ otherwise they wouldn’t come.” He led to me a little hut and asked me to do him the honour of resting in his house while he dreamed. “Wait in peace now,” he said when I was installed “I go on my journey”.

The hot hours dragged by, and nothing happened. Four ‘o’ clock passed. My faith was beginning to diminish when a strangled howl burst from the dreamer’s hut. I jumped round to see him come hurtling head first through the screens. He sprawled on his face, struggled up, and staggered into the open. He stood for a while clawing at the air and whining on a queer high note like a puppy’s. Then the words came gulping out of him: “Arise! Arise!...They come, they come!...Our friends from the west...They come!...Let us go down and greet them.” And then he started at a lumbering gallop down the beach.

A roar went up from the village and I found myself rushing helter-skelter with a thousand others into the shallows. When we reached the beach we strung ourselves out, line abreast, as we stormed through the shallows, stopping fifty yards from the reef’s edge. A deep silence was upon us, and so we waited.

I had just dipped my head to cool it when a man near me yelped and stood pointing at the water. When at last I did see what he was pointing at, everyone was screaming hard. The porpoises were pretty near by then, gambolling towards us. When they came to the edge of the blue water, they slackened speed, spread themselves out and started cruising back and forth in front of our line. Then, suddenly, there was no more of them.

I was in the act of touching the dreamer’s shoulder to take my leave when he turned his still face to me: “The king out of the west comes to meet me,” he muttered, pointing downwards. My eyes followed his hand and there, not ten yards away, was a

great shape of a porpoise poised in the glass-green water. Behind it followed a whole dusky flotilla of them.

Their leader drifted in by the dreamer's legs and the dreamer turned without a word to walk beside it. I saw other groups of people to the right and left of us turn shorewards one by one, arms lifted, faces bent upon the water.

A babble of quiet talk sprang up; I dropped behind to take in the whole scene. The villagers were welcoming their guests ashore with crooning words. As we approached, the keels of the creatures began to take the sand. They flapped gently as if asking for help and the men leaned down to throw their arms around them and ease them over the ridges. The porpoises showed not the least sign of alarm.

Then the dreamer flung his arms high and called to the men "Lift!" and the black shapes were half-dragged, half-carried, unresisting to the lip of the tide. There they settled down, those beautiful dignified shapes, utterly at peace, while all hell broke loose around them. Men, women and children were leaping and shrieking, throwing garlands of flowers around the still bodies. I still have the strange and disturbing image in my mind of that last scene – the humans raving while the beasts were so still.

We left the porpoises garlanded where they lay and returned to the houses. Later, when the falling tide had stranded them high and dry, men went down with their knives to cut them up. There was feasting and dancing. A chief's portion was set aside for me. I was expected to have it cured as a diet for my thinness. It was duly salted, but I could not bring myself to eat it.

I never did grow fat in the Gilbert islands.

### **The Sorcerer's Revenge**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed to 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 the District Officer on the island of Tarawa with his wife Olivia and his young child. The year is 1916. In this episode Grimble comes face to face with a death curse and finds out that even black magic usually has a logical explanation.

I don't mind admitting I felt queer when old Taakeuta said a death curse had been laid on me. You would have felt the same yourself at that hour in the morning. Old Taakeuta crept out of his village between 3 and 4 'o' clock and got my servant to wake me up. As soon as I stirred, the two of them began begging me not to light a lamp in case anyone else saw us. So I had to lie there under the mosquito net, listening to them talk about how the local sorcerer and the death curse he had put on me. I have to admit as I sat there in the dark, it gave me the creeps.

According to old Taakeuta, the only way I could remain safe from the death curse was to recite the prayers of the ancestors for warding off death-spells. If used right, they were infallible and old Taakeuta had come hurrying through the night to teach me how to do so before the next sun rose.

I knew about the death curses and although I didn't really believe that a hotch-potch of words and gestures could harm me, I was alone on an island full of age-old superstition. There was also the issue of old Taakeuta and his huge concern about me. I could hardly just turn the shaky old fellow back into the night uncomforted. Maybe I was a little curious as well. Anyhow, what with one thing and another, I spent the last hour before sunrise learning those protective prayers from him. All of them ended with the lovely words "Blessings and Peace are mine. Blessings and Peace."

At this point I should explain the innocent cause of this curse being laid upon me. It was a real life case of a defenceless orphan and the wicked uncle, involving a poor, half-witted girl who had come in front of me in the Land Court. After her parents died, her Uncle had managed to take her whole inheritance, which amounted to nearly twenty acres of good coconut land. He had got away with this solely because of his fearsome reputation as a sorcerer. When I found this out, I brought the facts to the attention of the District Officer and it was then the Uncle put a death curse on me. He said I was going to fall ill within a week and be dead within three weeks and he made sure this was known throughout the island.

The pains that woke me up just before dawn two days later were excruciating. It was as if an ice-cold hand with red-hot fingernails was tearing out a hollow space between my kidneys. The symptoms were familiar and told me at once what had hit me and it hadn't been caused by magic. The all-too-obvious fact was that I had swallowed a swig of the blistering stuff known as cantharidine in my bed-time toddy. Cantharides flies crawled in hundreds wherever the sweet sap of the coconut blossom was being tapped to make toddy and we had to take care to keep them out as no more than three were quite enough to put a man to bed for a week. The squeezed-out juice of a dozen or so, secretly dropped into a man's drink, was as sure a thing as any sorcerer knew of to make his death-curses work, and horribly.

When my servant saw me doubled up in pain, he was sure the death-curse was upon me, but I made him promise to keep silent. However there was still the Land Court that I was due to attend. My trouble happened to begin on Saturday, and Saturday was a day of rest as far as my court work went. However on Monday I still lay torn in half with pain, wondering what message I should send to the packed meeting house.

And then help came.

You can call it an accident out of space and time, unless you still prefer to call it Providence. It came in the form of a roaring westerly gale that blew up and pushed over half the dwellings on the island. Nobody was hurt, but it took the villagers a full week of intensive work to get their homes standing again. Until the following Monday nobody was bothered with me or my Lands Court and by the next Sunday morning I was able to stand.

That next Monday I got to the meeting-house steadily enough. Over a thousand people were waiting under the vast thatch. According to the sorcerer's forecast, I should have fallen ill by now, and they were there to check up. The wicked uncle who had cast the curse was squatting on his mat straight opposite my table. He was staring at me. Everyone was. As I took my seat I was nearly bowled out with fatigue and all I wanted to do was cry. I knew the only thing to carry me through that moment was a joke – any old joke, as long as it was topical enough. I looked around me and realised the topic for a joke was there, all around me – the weather. I stared back at the wicked uncle, smiled as strongly as I could and said something along the lines of “Well, the island would be a lot freer of these westerley gales if the local sorcerers wasted less time on death-curses and spent more time on spells for good weather.”

There followed what seemed an age of stunned silence. I thought my feeble effort had failed. And then my servant, Kirewa, gave a great hoot of mirth from behind me and a vast explosion of laughter was released. I howled with them and managed to shed a few a tears at the same time. When my eyes were dried and order restored, the wicked uncle had vanished. He never put his nose back in the Lands Court, and nothing was ever heard again of his curse.

Six weeks later, I finished my work on that island. The evening before I left, Old Taakeuta who had warned me about the curse, took both my hands in his and said "Sir. What might have happened but for the prayers of the ancestors we did after the sorcerer's curse?" He knew nothing of my illness. I could not bring myself to tell him that I had not used his prayers. It seemed to me then that in the last analysis 'blessings and peace' truly were things that a man could lean upon at need.

### **The Limping Man of Makin-Meang**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed to 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 now a District Officer and has to visit a number of different islands. The year is 1916. In this episode Grimble is on the furthest island of the group called Makin-Meang which is full of superstition. Although he is generally a sceptic about local religion and beliefs, Grimble has an experience that changes his mind.

I had heard of the ghosts of Makin-Meang before I got there. The whole of Gilbertese race looked on this most northerly island as the halfway house between the lands of the living and the dead.

The story went that, when anyone died, his shade must first travel up the line of islands to Makin-Meang where it must tread the length of land to the northern tip called the Place of Dread. The shades of local people used the eastern path and those of all the folk who died on the other fifteen islands used the western beach. There were therefore many more chances of meeting ghosts on the west side than on the east so that on the return journey only the eastern road was taken as only local ghosts used this road. You could find out in advance if it was safe or not by asking if any local death was expected the day you planned to use it.

When I had finished my routine work on the island, I naturally wanted to see the Place of Dread, so I called the Native Magistrate along one morning and asked him to find me a guide.

I have never seen a face change and darken so swiftly. He stood dumb for a while with downcast eyes; then, still looking at the ground, he exclaimed "Do not go to that place."

"But why?" I said irritably. "What's all this nonsense about this place? What's all the mystery? Shall I offend anyone by going?"

"Nobody will be offended," he replied, "but do not go. The place is perilous."

"In that case please find a village constable who isn't afraid to be guide," I said, "and send him to me here."

He looked at me mutely and left. The constable soon arrived, a giant of a man with bushy eyebrows and a smileless face. He said before we started that, as I was a stranger, I must take the western path just as the ghosts of strangers did, and that I must be careful not to look back.

"And if I do look back?"

"If you look back and see a ghost," he replied, "you will be dead within a year," and marched off ahead of me without another word. I followed him in silence, eyes front, and when we eventually got to the place, he just stopped and walked away into the forest.

"Here!" I called. "Where are you going now?"

"I will wait here," he replied, "there in the north is the place you are looking

for.”

But there was nothing in that empty waste to distinguish it from fifty other such promontories in the Gilbert Group. It was merely a blazing acre or two of coral rock with bellowing surf and the shrieks of sea-birds. I walked to the point. I couldn't believe that this was the place where the ghosts were meant to walk. Perhaps it was the noise, but I would have thought a place for the dead would be quiet.

Nevertheless the sight did have purpose to play. It was looking at this place that gave me the thirst that led to what followed. I went straight back to my guide among the trees and asked him to pick me a drinking nut.

He sprang back as if I had struck him: “I cannot do that,” he almost barked, “I cannot do that. These trees are sacred.”

He looked so afraid that I could not press him and since I had not learned to scale a forty-foot tree for myself, I had to sit down to a sickeningly dry lunch of bully-beef and biscuit.

It was past two ‘o’ clock when we started for home down the eastern path. My guide told me that his proper place on this path was in the rear, and dropped forty paces behind. After ten minutes' walking, with my thirst had got worse and I made up my mind to disregard what my guide had told me. I decided to ask anyone we met, anywhere, to pick me a nut. And then, just as I was thinking this peevish thought, a man suddenly came along the track towards us.

As he came nearer my eyes never left him, intent that I was going to get him to pick me a nut that I could drink. He walked with a strong limp and was clad rather ceremoniously in a fine mat belted around his middle. As he came up on my left, I noticed that his left cheek was scored by a scar and that his limp came from a twisted left foot and ankle. Even now I can still see the man in my memory.

But the question is - did he see me? When I greeted him he totally ignored me. He did not even turn his eyes towards me. He went by as if I didn't exist. I was shocked speechless. It was unlike the infallible courtesy of the islanders.

He was just about to pass my guide when I found my voice again: “Ask that man to stop,” I called back. But my guide didn't seem to hear. He just passed the man with the limp twenty yards from where I stood, without a sign of recognition.

I ran back to him. “Who is that man?” I asked

The guide stopped in his tracks, gazing at my finger “What man?” he said.

“That man,” I said sharply, still pointing. As we stood looking at each other, I saw that my guide was sweating. Then it was as if something suddenly collapsed inside him. “I am afraid in this place!” he screamed and without another word bolted out on the beach with an arm guarding his eyes, and disappeared around the point..

When I arrived back, my so-called guide was talking on the verandah with the Native Magistrate. He was violently gesturing but became silent as soon as he saw me approaching..

I plunged head-first into my story, telling the Magistrate about the man with limp and how discourteous he had been. I then accused my guide of trying to protect this man by pretending he wasn't there. I told him of the twisted foot, and the belted mat, and the scar.

The magistrate turned to exchange nods with my guide, and said “That was indeed Na Biria.

“Na Biria?” I echoed. “Is he a lunatic?”

The magistrate dropped his eyelids, meaning “No.”

“Then bring him to me this evening.”

He looked me straight in the eyes and said “I cannot do that.”

“Cannot?” I said “What word is this....cannot? Is everyone mad today? Why cannot you bring him to me?”

“He is dead,” said the Magistrate and added “He died this afternoon, soon before three ‘o’ clock.”

I felt a shiver go down my spine and was angry at my own fear. I said “If he only died at three, he is not yet buried so I can see his body.”

It was then my guide spoke. “No,” he said “He cannot. He is a stranger and they are preparing the dead man for his journey. NO stranger must break in or the rituals will not work and Na Biria will not be able to pass into paradise.”

The magistrate silenced him with a gesture and said solemnly to me “I am a Christian. I will take you there.”

I followed him towards the village. From a hundred yards off we heard the mourners wailing. I saw a dozen of them flogging the side of the house with sticks to frighten away strange ghosts. I went near enough to see people sitting with raised arms at the head and feet of the body. But I halted outside the circle of beaters.

It was finding the relatives so earnestly at work that stopped me. For them the dead man’s safe journey to the next world depended on their ritual and the intrusion of me, a stranger, would send him to damnation. I suddenly felt as small as I was. I could go no further. I turned away from the house and the Magistrate followed me in silence.

## **The Female Gaol**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed to 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 now a District Officer and has been posted to the island of Abemama, the headquarters of the Central Gilberts. The year is 1917 and his wife Olivia has recently had a second child, Rosemary Anne. This is the story of the women’s prison on Abemama and how they put it to a novel use.

Our back premises were situated up against the enclosure of the female gaol. It was a large building, consisting of a single forty-by-thirty foot room enclosed in heatproof walls. I think it was in our fourth month there my wife Olivia observed it was the coolest building on the government station. “That building is absolutely wasted,” she said “There’s never any prisoners in there. The women of the island must be incredibly law-abiding.”

I nodded but personally I felt that the emptiness of the gaol owed less to the good behaviour of the Abemama women than to the fact that the Native Court disliked sending ladies to the lock-up. But it was not my role to interfere in such matters of local judgement although I agreed with Olivia that the beautiful empty gaol could be used just as well for sick women as for sinful ones. As a result, Olivia collared it as a centre for the care and education of expectant mothers who were suffering illness. I put up a month of feeble resistance to my wife’s suggestion and then gave in..

The Native Magistrate was delighted with the arrangement and co-operated whole-heartedly. In fact he co-operated in a way that threatened to cause embarrassment. His co-operation involved directing the village policemen to be more

vigilant of the offences committed by females of child-bearing age so that they would be sentenced to prison. This then meant they could take advantage of the course of instruction initiated by Olivia to the expectant mothers who were lodged in the gaol. His argument for his behaviour was that since the gaol had been converted into a first-class school for expectant mothers, it was now practically worth any young woman's while to be locked up in it. We first learned of this when a flood of eleven cheerful young women (convicted of offences ranging from abusive language to assault about a policeman) suddenly presented themselves to the wardress of the prison for immediate incarceration.

At the time Olivia had five patients, and said she could not possibly move a single one of them out. This meant there was only room for seven new candidates out of the eleven. However not one of them showed the least wish to appeal. On the contrary, they all said they wanted to stay as long as the law allowed them, and longer if possible, so as to learn everything Olivia had to teach them about how expectant mothers should be treated. The two who had got three months each for joint assault and battery upon a policeman burst into tears at the cruel idea that they might be let off. They regarded themselves as scholarship-holders amongst the girls whose crimes had only earned them a week or two in prison.

The problem was that since they had been sentenced, they now had an absolute right to use the prison and it was my duty to see the sentences were carried out. So all the ladies had to be taken in. The wardress was surprised and annoyed at my weakness. She made me feel as if I was quite the worst criminal in the place. I had some initial difficulty with Olivia too. She said the idiotic working of the law would be very bad for her patients. However we managed to get around the problem of overcrowding. The convicted ladies agreed to sleep in the clean thatched working sheds within the gaol yard. It was therefore only innocent folk – that is to say the patients and the wardress – who occupied the actual lock-up at night.

The Native Magistrate was delighted with the arrangement. He said that it not only provided for the proper treatment of the prison population but it also made everyone feel free despite being in prison. I ventured to warn him that if the wave of female crime continued at the rate that it had suddenly taken up on Abemama, it would force the expectant mothers out of gaol. He replied with a strange conviction in his voice that he was sure we had seen the worst of it. And oddly enough after that we never had more than three convictions a month.

After due reflection, I decided against reporting the matter to the headquarters. The truth is, I found it more than difficult to make a convincing case for the use of one of His Majesty's Proclaimed Gaols in furthering a little scheme of my wife, however well meaning it was. When the facts were set down in writing they just seemed to make no legitimate sense at all.

But despite the unofficial nature of the project, I have to say that the arrangement was a very happy one for all parties concerned. The village police became better at bringing women-folk to court for their crimes, the expectant mothers were so well looked after it was often difficult to get rid of them, and there was an excellent distribution of knowledge of pre-natal hygiene and infant welfare among the women of Abemama.

### **The Tale (or tail) of the Sting Ray.**

Arthur Grimble has been stationed to 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 now a District Officer and has been posted to the island of

Abemama, the headquarters of the Central Gilberts. Although his many duties involve the local courts and justice, he was also sometimes called upon to perform medical duties. The year is 1917.

Being the husband of Olivia who was viewed as a great healer on the island, meant that sometimes the villagers expected more medical help from me than I was qualified to give them. When I was on the island of Tarawa I had watched a good many operations, but I never felt my observations qualified me for surgery. Nevertheless, in the absence of anyone more competent to do them, I was faced with one in our third month on the island of Abemama. A middle-aged villager was carried into my office and laid on the floor with the request that I would at once cut the “sting” of a sting-ray out of his leg.

A sting-ray is a dangerous fish to catch because of its whiplike tail armed at the tip with a pair of bony, brittle, five-inch, barbed spines as sharp as needles. If it is hauled in close before being killed, the tail whips from the water and, in a flash, one of those spines is left buried in the fisher’s body. There is a filthy slime on the broken-off spine, which quickly leads to septicemia if the thing is left embedded in the wound.

“But why cut it out?” I said to the group who had accompanied the patient “Why not just pull it out with a pair of pincers?”

“If you pull it out,” they replied, “the barbs will break off inside him, and then, in a day or a week, he will die of the poison. The doctor always cuts them out whole and cleans the wound with brown medicine that burns.”

I presumed by the brown medicine that burned they meant iodine. I had iodine, but, as I protested, I was not a doctor, and had nothing to stop the bleeding with.

They looked at me sorrowfully: “The flesh will bleed,” they said “But the sting is buried in the muscle, and muscles, as you know, do not bleed.”

I did not know anything of the kind. The fact was entirely new to me and I only half believed them. That was until one of the nurses from the Hospital confirmed it. “Very well,” I said to him in an attempt to get out of it, “You know a lot more about it than I do – you get ahead with it.”

“Sir,” he replied, “If I cut him and he dies, I shall be dismissed, for I have no certificate for performing operations. But if you cut him and I sew him up, I shall not be dismissed even in the event of his death, because I can say you cut him and I just tried to save his life by sewing him up.”

That seemed to settle it to everyone’s moral satisfaction, so I gave in. After applying a tourniquet, the nurse handed me a lancet which he used for opening boils. He stood by me with swabs for whatever bleeding there was (which seemed to be a lot), while my victim’s friends kept the incision open by holding it on either side of his thigh. The pain of my clumsy efforts must have been terrible for the poor patient, especially when I had to fish in the wound with the tweezers for the broken bits of barb. He was dripping with sweat, but he lay from beginning to end without a gasp or wince. The nurse saved his life, as arranged, by sewing him up, while I went outside and was sick.