

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

### **Part 12 - Assignment with an Octopus**

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 finding out about one of ocean's most gruesome inhabitants.

The fear I had for the larger kinds of octopus was different from my fear of sharks. It was a blind fear, sick with disgust and unreasoned as a child's fear of darkness.

It was their tentacles that struck the most fear into me. Once anchored in a cleft in the coral face, it can hurl one or all of those whiplashes forward with speed of lightning, and once its suckers are clamped about their prey, nothing but the octopus' death will break their awful hold.

But when a hungry man steps into the picture, that very relentless tenacity of the octopus that also becomes its undoing. The Gilbertese happen to value certain parts of it as food. They hunt for it in pairs with one man acting as the bait and his partner as the killer.

Any two boys of seventeen, any day of the week, will go out and get you half a dozen octopus for the mere fun of it. Here lies the whole point of this story. The hunt is, in the most literal sense, nothing but child's play to the Gilbertese.

It is the human bait that starts the real game. He dives and tempts the octopus by swimming a few strokes in front of its cranny. Then he turns and makes straight for it, giving himself up to the octopus' waiting arms. Sometimes nothing happens and the beast will not respond to the lure. But usually it strikes.

Meanwhile the partner on the reef above stares down through the water, waiting for his moment. His teeth are his only weapon. He must wait until his partner's body has been drawn right up to the entrance of the cleft and then he dives, grabs hold of his friend and jerks him away from the cleft. The octopus is torn adrift and clamps itself more fiercely to its prey. In the same second, the human bait gives a kick which brings him to the surface. He turns on his back, still holding his breath for better buoyancy with the octopus still attached. The killer closes in, grasps the octopus' head from behind and turning the face up towards himself, he plunges his teeth between the bulging eyes and bites down with all his strength. That is the end of it. The octopus dies instantly, the suckers release their hold and the arms fall away. The two successful hunters paddle with whoops of delighted laughter to the reef with their catch.

I had only been a few months at Tarawa when I witnessed my first octopus hunt. I watched every stage with my water glass, from the first dive to the landing of the dead catch. When it was over I went up to the two boys who I had been observing and they explained to me the amusing simplicity of the thing.

"There's only one trick the decoy-man must never forget," they said "If he is not wearing the water spectacles of the white man he must cover his eyes with a hand as he comes close to the octopus or the suckers might blind him." They then began whispering together and I knew in a curdling flash what they were saying to each other. Before they turned to speak to me again, a horrified conviction was upon me. They were going to propose that I should take a turn at being the bait myself, just to

see how delightfully easy it was. And that was indeed what they did. It did not even occur to them that I might not leap at the offer. I was already known as a young white man who liked swimming, and fishing, and laughing with the villagers. Naturally I should enjoy the octopus hunt as much as they did. Without even waiting for my answer, they gleefully ducked off the edge of the reef to look for another octopus – a fine fat one – *mine*. Left standing alone I pondered my quandary. One fact was beyond doubt: the Gilbertese reserved most of their humour for physical cowardice. How could I hold any respect if I was turn this suggestion down if I decided I would rather face the octopus than the villagers' laughter.

I was dressed in khaki slacks, canvas shoes and a short-sleeved singlet. I took off the shoes and made up my mind to shed the singlet if told to do so, but I was determined to stick to my trousers throughout. Dead or alive, an official minus his pants is a preposterous object, and I felt I could not face that extra horror.

I hope I did not look as yellow as I felt when I stood to take the plunge; "Remember, one hand for your eyes," said one of the boys and I dived.

I do not suppose it is really true that the eyes of an octopus shine in the dark, but I could have sworn the brute's eyes burned at me as I turned in towards it's cranny. That dark glow was the last thing I saw as I put my left hand over my eyes and rose into his clutches. All I remember then is chiefly a dreadful sliminess with a huge power behind it. Something whipped round my left forearm and the back of my neck. In the same flash, another something slapped itself high on my forehead and I felt it crawling down inside the back of my singlet. A mouth began to nuzzle below my throat, at the junction of my collar-bones. But despite all this, something still directed me to hold my breath.

I was awakened from my cowardly trance by a quick, strong pull on my shoulders. The cables around me tightened painfully but I knew I was adrift from the reef. I gave a kick, rose to the surface and turned on my back with the brute sticking out of my chest like a tumour. My mouth was smothered by some flabby moving horror. The suckers felt like hot rings pulling at my skin. It was only two seconds, I suppose, from then to the attack of my partner, but it seemed like a century.

My friend came up between me and the reef. He pounced, pulled, bit down, and the thing was over – for everyone but me. At the sudden relaxation of the tentacles, I let out a great breath, sank and drew in my next breath underwater. It took both boys to get me, coughing, heaving and pretending to join in their delighted laughter, back to the reef. I had to let them do a kind of war-dance around me, in which the dead octopus was slung whizzing past my head from one to the other. I had a chance to observe it and it was not by any stretch of the imagination a giant, but just plain average. I left hurriedly for the cover of the jetty and was sick.