

A Pattern of Islands by Arthur Grimble

Part 14 - The Prisoner

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 Grimble is on the island of Beru where there is a large prison. His wife, Olivia is expecting her third child.

The average Gilbertese prisoner of those days seldom took his incarceration as a great hardship. A few weeks or months in the lock-up meant nothing locally in terms of social stigma and what the Government called hard labour was somewhat of a joke compared to what his family demanded of him in the village. So a fellow could always count on a nice rest in gaol which meant there were rarely rebels to the system. But Obadaia was one of the few.

He was a craggy Hercules of a man, much taller than most of his race, intelligent and a well-known wrestler. He had stabbed another villager through the arm and brought him very near bleeding to death for paying undue attention to his wife. The wife who was a good deal younger than him was innocent of the offence and lived quietly with his mother while he was serving his sentence.

Obadaia was sullenly idle. I had only once seen him snap out of it which was when we were installing our new kitchen stove. But when he went back to his ordinary prison routines he returned to his black moods and began to pretend he was sick. At least, I thought he was pretending. He never had a temperature but he said he had frightful pains inside him. However, the solution of his problem and mine got itself strangely tangled with the birth of June Angela, our last child.

Olivia kept very well until the last week of June. Nothing had happened before the birth of the other three children to make us expect trouble this time. What did hit her I cannot say, but she came back from a sunset walk one day saying she was giddy. The thermometer said she had a temperature of 104 degrees. Both of us guessed that if the fever stayed up there for long there might be a premature birth. Towards midnight we started to get things ready.

The main thing was to sterilise everything likely to be used, including gallons and gallons of water. It was the water that brought Obadaia into the picture as I organised watches of prisoners in the kitchen to keep heaps of it continually on the boil. I admit that the use of His Majesty's guest for domestic purposes was strictly forbidden, but I did not happen to be thinking much of rules and regulations at the time. The prisoners themselves – there were nine of them – were quick to respond when I woke them in gaol. Obadaia took the lead at once "Men-o-o!" he called "We are asked to save Missis and her baby! We prisoners! We bad men! How wonderful is this thing we are given to do!". It was arranged that they should work in the kitchen. When I returned in ten minutes to see how the fire was going. Obadaia whispered "Sir, is Missis asleep?" I told him she was but very restless. He turned back to the stove without comment and I left again.

As I settled to my reading in the lounge, Olivia's fevered mutterings came to me brokenly and then there came a time when the muttering was no more. Olivia seemed to be humming instead, on a deep, quiet note, and there was a contentment in the sound.

But when I went into her room, I found out it was not Olivia who hummed. She was lying in a silent untroubled sleep. The sound seemed to come from nowhere

and everywhere and it was not until I brought in the lamp that I found Obadaia sitting on the step of the veranda doorway. He had been there for three hours, he said. His heart had been heavy when I told him Missis was not sleeping well, and he thought I would not mind if he came and sang to her the way his grandmother had taught him. There were no special words to his song, only a trick of making what he called a ghostvoice that floated over sick people and gave them dreamless sleep. His stern face was lit with a smile. I let him stay crooning his strange wordless lullaby and Olivia slept her dreamless sleep till break of day.

When she woke it seemed best not to tell her of Obadaia. The kitchen watch went on, but I sent Obadaia off to get some food and sleep. He said he wanted nothing but a drink of tea, and begged leave to lie under the trees near the house, if the law allowed it. The law did nothing of the kind, but I did, on condition that he would stay off shift until nightfall and eat something solid at midday. I saw nothing more of him until that night when he returned to duty in the kitchen.

Olivia was asleep but not restfully. When Obadaia came back I watched the effect of his magic again. Three or four minutes after he began she turned on her side and seemed to be engulfed at once in peace. She stayed so until near eleven 'o' clock when Obadaia got up from the doorstep. "I think it will not be long now," he whispered. "It is expedient to make all things ready," and went back to the kitchen.

June Angela arrived four hours later, an hour before sunrise, lobster-pink and weighing just over three pounds. There were no complications. It was only afterwards that I asked Obadaia how he had guessed the timing of the birth. "The thought came into my heart as I sang," he answered.

For the next three weeks there was nothing but sunshine from Obadaia. We were building a sea-wall of coral blocks at the time, which made heavier chores than usual for the prisoners, but he did the work of any other four of them together, laughing and splashing while he heaved great foundation blocks around like a boy-giant happy with his playthings. The Magistrate was concerned, he felt that such a flow of gaiety was indecent in a prisoner. I said it was simply Obadaia's way of showing regret for his past misdeeds. The magistrate said perhaps-yes, but there was something else behind it.

He turned out to be right, although I never told him how.

One day I went out to the sea-wall to say something to Obadaia. He was not among them. They said he was tired and had gone to lie down in a clump of salt-bush not far off. I found him sitting alone there clasping his stomach and gasping.

The doctor who arrived the following week found he had advanced chronic appendicitis and operated at once. He had never been lying about his illness after all. However I was to find out he had been lying about something else.

His young wife was there holding his hand when I went to see him in hospital. I told her how much he had helped Olivia, and how we had all misjudged him before that. But instead of smiling she hung her head and whispered "We are ashamed." Then she whispered it but this time looking at Obadaia.

"We are ashamed," he whispered back at her "But I cannot tell the master."

"You must tell him," she insisted "If you do not, I will."

"Be quiet," he pleaded "I will tell him and the Missis when I am better."

"You will tell him now, because of your love and honour for the Missis."

He closed his eyes in agreement, clinging tight to her hand as he began to tell his tale: "Sir, you remember? I slept under the trees at daybreak of the second day after I had sung to Missis. And when it was noon, I awoke and a thought came to me.

An evil thought. I said to myself 'Perhaps my wife is not faithful to me again'. And I decided to go and see her. So I went and nobody saw me go. I came to my mother's house and nobody saw me arrive in the village as all the men were sleeping after the midday meal. And I went in...."

He broke off, looking at his wife: "Isn't that enough?" he said "I have told them of my sin against the law."

"It is not enough," she said "For there are other things forbidden to prisoners and I sinned with you in doing them."

He sighed heavily and looked at me again: "I went in. I woke my mother and said to her 'Leave me alone with my wife'. She left us alone and I looked at my wife's eyes and I knew she had not been unfaithful to me. I stayed with her and we lay until the evening. There, the tale is done."

"The tale is not done," said the wife staring at the floor.

Obadaia groaned: "Is it not enough? Will you have me locked up in prison forever?"

"Well I shall be locked up too," she said "For I sinned with you."

"So I returned when it was dark," he went on drearily "and sang to Missis again. And when everyone was waiting for news of Missis, I crept away. I went back to my wife and we lay again until the morning...."

"I have greatly sinned," he added after a long pause.

Naturally, I was worried about the crimes Obadaia had committed but what interested me more was the moral courage of him and his wife and where it came from.

I turned to the young woman "Tell me your thoughts," I said "Do you think he sinned most against the Government or against me or against the Missis?"

"If he had sinned only against the Government and you," she assured me solemnly, "It would have been something for us to keep a secret...but because we sinned against the Missis..."

"And how many months in prison do you expect to get for your part in the crime?" I asked her.

"I thought perhaps a year, for I asked him to come back again."

The abundantly clear fact was that, the only reason they confessed to me was because I was the husband of the object of their devotion. My only obligation therefore was to pass on the apology to Olivia which I did. She in turn very properly decided that she had no right to pass this information onto the District Officer.

In any case, we both agreed, it was largely June Angela's fault for catching everyone on the wrong foot as she did. So the thing never went any further. As for Obadaia, what with his good-conduct marks, his sentence ran out while he was still in hospital. Or, rather, Olivia saw to it that he was kept in hospital until his sentence ran out.