

A Pattern of Islands *by Arthur Grimble*

Part 3 - 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."