

A Pattern of Islands by *Arthur Grimble*

Part 6 - 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 Kitiona, 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 Kitiona 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.