

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

### **Part 9 - 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 possible 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.