

A Pattern of Islands by Arthur Grimble

Part 10 - The Tale (or tail) of the Sting Ray

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. Although his many duties involve the local courts and justice, he was also sometimes called upon to perform medical duties. The year is 1917.

Being the husband of Olivia who was viewed as a great healer on the island, meant that sometimes the villagers expected more medical help from me than I was qualified to give them. When I was on the island of Tarawa I had watched a good many operations, but I never felt my observations qualified me for surgery. Nevertheless, in the absence of anyone more competent to do them, I was faced with one in our third month on the island of Abemama. A middle-aged villager was carried into my office and laid on the floor with the request that I would at once cut the “sting” of a sting-ray out of his leg.

A sting-ray is a dangerous fish to catch because of its whiplike tail armed at the tip with a pair of bony, brittle, five-inch, barbed spines as sharp as needles. If it is hauled in close before being killed, the tail whips from the water and, in a flash, one of those spines is left buried in the fisher’s body. There is a filthy slime on the broken-off spine, which quickly leads to septiceamia if the thing is left embedded in the wound.

“But why cut it out?” I said to the group who had accompanied the patient
“Why not just pull it out with a pair of pincers?”

“If you pull it out,” they replied, “the barbs will break off inside him, and then, in a day or a week, he will die of the poison. The doctor always cuts them out whole and cleans the wound with brown medicine that burns.”

I presumed by the brown medicine that burned they meant iodine. I had iodine, but, as I protested, I was not a doctor, and had nothing to stop the bleeding with.

They looked at me sorrowfully: “The flesh will bleed,” they said “But the sting is buried in the muscle, and muscles, as you know, do not bleed.”

I did not know anything of the kind. The fact was entirely new to me and I only half believed them. That was until one of the nurses from the Hospital confirmed it. “Very well,” I said to him in an attempt to get out of it, “You know a lot more about it than I do – you get ahead with it.”

“Sir,” he replied, “If I cut him and he dies, I shall be dismissed, for I have no certificate for performing operations. But if you cut him and I sew him up, I shall not be dismissed even in the event of his death, because I can say you cut him and I just tried to save his life by sewing him up.”

That seemed to settle it to everyone’s moral satisfaction, so I gave in. After applying a tourniquet, the nurse handed me a lancet which he used for opening boils. He stood by me with swabs for whatever bleeding there was (which seemed to be a lot), while my victim’s friends kept the incision open by holding it on either side of his thigh. The pain of my clumsy efforts must have been terrible for the poor patient, especially when I had to fish in the wound with the tweezers for the broken bits of barb. He was dripping with sweat, but he lay from beginning to end without a gasp or wince. The nurse saved his life, as arranged, by sewing him up, while I went outside

and was sick.