

A Pattern of Islands *by Arthur Grimble*

Part 8 - The Limping Man of Makin-Meang

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 to visit a number of different islands. The year is 1916. In this episode Grimble is on the furthest island of the group called Makin-Meang which is full of superstition. Although he is generally a sceptic about local religion and beliefs, Grimble has an experience that changes his mind.

I had heard of the ghosts of Makin-Meang before I got there. The whole of Gilbertese race looked on this most northerly island as the halfway house between the lands of the living and the dead.

The story went that, when anyone died, his shade must first travel up the line of islands to Makin-Meang where it must tread the length of land to the northern tip called the Place of Dread. The shades of local people used the eastern path and those of all the folk who died on the other fifteen islands used the western beach. There were therefore many more chances of meeting ghosts on the west side than on the east so that on the return journey only the eastern road was taken as only local ghosts used this road. You could find out in advance if it was safe or not by asking if any local death was expected the day you planned to use it.

When I had finished my routine work on the island, I naturally wanted to see the Place of Dread, so I called the Native Magistrate along one morning and asked him to find me a guide.

I have never seen a face change and darken so swiftly. He stood dumb for a while with downcast eyes; then, still looking at the ground, he exclaimed "Do not go to that place."

"But why?" I said irritably. "What's all this nonsense about this place? What's all the mystery? Shall I offend anyone by going?"

"Nobody will be offended," he replied, "but do not go. The place is perilous."

"In that case please find a village constable who isn't afraid to be guide," I said, "and send him to me here."

He looked at me mutely and left. The constable soon arrived, a giant of a man with bushy eyebrows and a smileless face. He said before we started that, as I was a stranger, I must take the western path just as the ghosts of strangers did, and that I must be careful not to look back.

"And if I do look back?"

"If you look back and see a ghost," he replied, "you will be dead within a year," and marched off ahead of me without another word. I followed him in silence, eyes front, and when we eventually got to the place, he just stopped and walked away into the forest.

"Here!" I called. "Where are you going now?"

"I will wait here," he replied, "there in the north is the place you are looking for."

But there was nothing in that empty waste to distinguish it from fifty other such promontories in the Gilbert Group. It was merely a blazing acre or two of coral rock with bellowing surf and the shrieks of sea-birds. I walked to the point. I couldn't

believe that this was the place where the ghosts were meant to walk. Perhaps it was the noise, but I would have thought a place for the dead would be quiet.

Nevertheless the sight did have purpose to play. It was looking at this place that gave me the thirst that led to what followed. I went straight back to my guide among the trees and asked him to pick me a drinking nut.

He sprang back as if I had struck him: "I cannot do that," he almost barked, "I cannot do that. These trees are sacred."

He looked so afraid that I could not press him and since I had not learned to scale a forty-foot tree for myself, I had to sit down to a sickeningly dry lunch of bully-beef and biscuit.

It was past two 'o' clock when we started for home down the eastern path. My guide told me that his proper place on this path was in the rear, and dropped forty paces behind. After ten minutes' walking, with my thirst had got worse and I made up my mind to disregard what my guide had told me. I decided to ask anyone we met, anywhere, to pick me a nut. And then, just as I was thinking this peevish thought, a man suddenly came along the track towards us.

As he came nearer my eyes never left him, intent that I was going to get him to pick me a nut that I could drink. He walked with a strong limp and was clad rather ceremoniously in a fine mat belted around his middle. As he came up on my left, I noticed that his left cheek was scored by a scar and that his limp came from a twisted left foot and ankle. Even now I can still see the man in my memory.

But the question is - did he see me? When I greeted him he totally ignored me. He did not even turn his eyes towards me. He went by as if I didn't exist. I was shocked speechless. It was unlike the infallible courtesy of the islanders.

He was just about to pass my guide when I found my voice again: "Ask that man to stop," I called back. But my guide didn't seem to hear. He just passed the man with the limp twenty yards from where I stood, without a sign of recognition.

I ran back to him. "Who is that man?" I asked

The guide stopped in his tracks, gazing at my finger "What man?" he said.

"That man," I said sharply, still pointing. As we stood looking at each other, I saw that my guide was sweating. Then it was as if something suddenly collapsed inside him. "I am afraid in this place!" he screamed and without another word bolted out on the beach with an arm guarding his eyes, and disappeared around the point..

When I arrived back, my so-called guide was talking on the verandah with the Native Magistrate. He was violently gesturing but became silent as soon as he saw me approaching..

I plunged head-first into my story, telling the Magistrate about the man with limp and how discourteous he had been. I then accused my guide of trying to protect this man by pretending he wasn't there. I told him of the twisted foot, and the belted mat, and the scar.

The magistrate turned to exchange nods with my guide, and said "That was indeed Na Biria.

"Na Biria?" I echoed. "Is he a lunatic?"

The magistrate dropped his eyelids, meaning "No."

"Then bring him to me this evening."

He looked me straight in the eyes and said "I cannot do that."

"Cannot?" I said "What word is this....cannot? Is everyone mad today? Why cannot you bring him to me?"

"He is dead," said the Magistrate and added "He died this afternoon, soon before three 'o' clock."

I felt a shiver go down my spine and was angry at my own fear. I said “If he only died at three, he is not yet buried so I can see his body.”

It was then my guide spoke. “No,” he said “He cannot. He is a stranger and they are preparing the dead man for his journey. NO stranger must break in or the rituals will not work and Na Biria will not be able to pass into paradise.”

The magistrate silenced him with a gesture and said solemnly to me “I am a Christian. I will take you there.”

I followed him towards the village. From a hundred yards off we heard the mourners wailing. I saw a dozen of them flogging the side of the house with sticks to frighten away strange ghosts. I went near enough to see people sitting with raised arms at the head and feet of the body. But I halted outside the circle of beaters.

It was finding the relatives so earnestly at work that stopped me. For them the dead man’s safe journey to the next world depended on their ritual and the intrusion of me, a stranger, would send him to damnation. I suddenly felt as small as I was. I could go no further. I turned away from the house and the Magistrate followed me in silence.