

A Pattern of Islands *by Arthur Grimble*

Part 7 - The Sorcerer's Revenge

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 currently the District Officer on the island of Tarawa with his wife Olivia and his young child. The year is 1916. In this episode Grimble comes face to face with a death curse and finds out that even black magic usually has a logical explanation.

I don't mind admitting I felt queer when old Taakeuta said a death curse had been laid on me. You would have felt the same yourself at that hour in the morning. Old Taakeuta crept out of his village between 3 and 4 'o' clock and got my servant to wake me up. As soon as I stirred, the two of them began begging me not to light a lamp in case anyone else saw us. So I had to lie there under the mosquito net, listening to them talk about how the local sorcerer and the death curse he had put on me. I have to admit as I sat there in the dark, it gave me the creeps.

According to old Taakeuta, the only way I could remain safe from the death curse was to recite the prayers of the ancestors for warding off death-spells. If used right, they were infallible and old Taakeuta had come hurrying through the night to teach me how to do so before the next sun rose.

I knew about the death curses and although I didn't really believe that a hotch-potch of words and gestures could harm me, I was alone on an island full of age-old superstition. There was also the issue of old Taakeuta and his huge concern about me. I could hardly just turn the shaky old fellow back into the night uncomforted. Maybe I was a little curious as well. Anyhow, what with one thing and another, I spent the last hour before sunrise learning those protective prayers from him. All of them ended with the lovely words "Blessings and Peace are mine. Blessings and Peace."

At this point I should explain the innocent cause of this curse being laid upon me. It was a real life case of a defenceless orphan and the wicked uncle, involving a poor, half-witted girl who had come in front of me in the Land Court. After her parents died, her Uncle had managed to take her whole inheritance, which amounted to nearly twenty acres of good coconut land. He had got away with this solely because of his fearsome reputation as a sorcerer. When I found this out, I brought the facts to the attention of the District Officer and it was then the Uncle put a death curse on me. He said I was going to fall ill within a week and be dead within three weeks and he made sure this was known throughout the island.

The pains that woke me up just before dawn two days later were excruciating. It was as if an ice-cold hand with red-hot fingernails was tearing out a hollow space between my kidneys. The symptoms were familiar and told me at once what had hit me and it hadn't been caused by magic. The all-too-obvious fact was that I had swallowed a swig of the blistering stuff known as cantharidine in my bed-time toddy. Cantharides flies crawled in hundreds wherever the sweet sap of the coconut blossom was being tapped to make toddy and we had to take care to keep them out as no more than three were quite enough to put a man to bed for a week. The squeezed-out juice of a dozen or so, secretly dropped into a man's drink, was as sure a thing as any sorcerer knew of to make his death-curses work, and horribly.

When my servant saw me doubled up in pain, he was sure the death-curse was

upon me, but I made him promise to keep silent. However there was still the Land Court that I was due to attend. My trouble happened to begin on Saturday, and Saturday was a day of rest as far as my court work went. However on Monday I still lay torn in half with pain, wondering what message I should send to the packed meeting house.

And then help came.

You can call it an accident out of space and time, unless you still prefer to call it Providence. It came in the form of a roaring westerly gale that blew up and pushed over half the dwellings on the island. Nobody was hurt, but it took the villagers a full week of intensive work to get their homes standing again. Until the following Monday nobody was bothered with me or my Lands Court and by the next Sunday morning I was able to stand.

That next Monday I got to the meeting-house steadily enough. Over a thousand people were waiting under the vast thatch. According to the sorcerer's forecast, I should have fallen ill by now, and they were there to check up. The wicked uncle who had cast the curse was squatting on his mat straight opposite my table. He was staring at me. Everyone was. As I took my seat I was nearly bowled out with fatigue and all I wanted to do was cry. I knew the only thing to carry me through that moment was a joke – any old joke, as long as it was topical enough. I looked around me and realised the topic for a joke was there, all around me – the weather. I stared back at the wicked uncle, smiled as strongly as I could and said something along the lines of “Well, the island would be a lot freer of these westerley gales if the local sorcerers wasted less time on death-curses and spent more time on spells for good weather.”

There followed what seemed an age of stunned silence. I thought my feeble effort had failed. And then my servant, Kirewa, gave a great hoot of mirth from behind me and a vast explosion of laughter was released. I howled with them and managed to shed a few a tears at the same time. When my eyes were dried and order restored, the wicked uncle had vanished. He never put his nose back in the Lands Court, and nothing was ever heard again of his curse.

Six weeks later, I finished my work on that island. The evening before I left, Old Taakeuta who had warned me about the curse, took both my hands in his and said “Sir. What might have happened but for the prayers of the ancestors we did after the sorcerer's curse?” He knew nothing of my illness. I could not bring myself to tell him that I had not used his prayers. It seemed to me then that in the last analysis ‘blessings and peace’ truly were things that a man could lean upon at need.