

A Pattern of Islands *by Arthur Grimble*

Part 13 - The duel with the tiger-shark

Arthur Grimble has been stationed at 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 has spent some time in the Central Gilberts and after a bad bout of illness has returned to Tarawa. It is here he hears the story about Tabanaora.

I can't remember who first told me the story of Tabanaora's duel with the tiger shark. Some people denied it had ever happened, but whether the story was true or not, the thing he was reputed to have done was typical of the spirit of his people. Family love is as strong in the Gilbert Islander as his courage.

Tabanaora was the eldest of eight brother who lived in the northern village of Tarawa. He was a man of thirty or more when the youngest brother, Tebina, came up for initiation into manhood. Tabanaora himself had schooled Tebina through twelve long years to face the stern ordeal. The boy went through the test by fire without the flicker of an eyelid and Tabanaora's pride soared. But his joy was short-lived, for Tebina was killed by a tiger-shark the day after he had been pronounced cured of his burns.

The shark took him after sunrise, as he stood fishing with rod and line by his home village. He was seen from the shore to fling his arms up and go under. That was the last of him. A dozen canoes searched the banks, but no trace of his body remained.

Tabanaora was heart-broken, but it was not only grief for his personal loss that weighed on him but fear for the boy's after-life. Even though he was a baptized Christian, Tabanoaro still believed there was a guardian of the gate between earth and paradise who would strangle all the ghosts of the unhappy dead whose bodies had not received the appropriate rituals. Since no body had been found this was of course impossible for Tebina and he was doomed to everlasting extinction – unless at least one limb of his body could be recovered for the death-rituals.

But Tabanaora had a hope to buoy him. The shark would probably return at the same hour next day to the bank where it had made its kill. He prepared himself for what he had to do next, fasting all day long in his screened hut by the lagoonside.

At sunset he emerged and crossed the narrow breadth of the land to the ocean beach, carrying with him his ten-foot wooden spear. He laboured all night by torchlight, arming his spear with the razor-sharp teeth of tiger-sharks that he himself had killed. At dawn he stood on the beach naked, to give a blessing to his finished spear:

Rise, Sun, with fortunate face
 Rise, Sun, the Ancestor
 Rise, Ancestors all
 Rise, God and Jesus-o-o!
 O, Sun and God and Jesus, bless my spear.

Then he turned and strode through the morning stillness of the coconut grove back to the quiet lagoonside, and as he did the villagers crowded to stare in silence as he swam with his spear to meet his brother's killer.

The shark gave him no time to wait and think. It was already on the prowl nearby. His feet were hardly stood on the sandbank when its dorsal fin was seen racing straight in at him from behind. The watchers roared a warning. He whipped round, side-stepped and thrust. The point of the spear glanced off the shark's leather hide. But he was safe for a moment: tiger-sharks cannot turn quickly. The monster surged past, to reverse direction thirty yards off.

This time his approach was more cautious. It began to circle him slowly, giving Tabanoara the chance to measure his distances as the circles gradually narrowed. When the charge came, he was so sure of himself that he didn't bother to side-step. He stood stock-still in the path of its lunge and as the vast jaws opened he hurled his whole weight forward, stiff-armed, to plunge the spear's point between them. That and the shark's own momentum carried the saw-edged spear tearing into it. The impact heaved Tabanoara high in the air and he clung on. The spear snapped and he went under, only to come up unhurt and stand with folded arms while the shark thrashed itself to death.

Tabanoara hauled it ashore by the tail, triumphantly singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*. It was dragged to his house where he cut it open, chanting the ritual prayers as he did. The remains of his brother Tebina were in the shark's stomach and there was enough of him to ensure that the rituals were successful. The boy would be safely in paradise.