

A Pattern of Islands by Arthur Grimble

Part 11 - A small slip of words

Arthur Grimble has been stationed as a cadet for the Colonial Office in the Gilbert and Ellice islands. The islands are spread over 500 miles of the Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and Hawaii. In this episode he has been sent on his first recruitment mission to employ islanders into the ranks of the British Government.

Recruiting in the islands was a popular event with the general public and the island of Tarawa was no exception. When Mr Workman and myself sat at our recruiting table in the village 'maneaba' or speaking house, we were faced with a sea of bronze torsos in front of us, their heads crowned with white flowers. All there in the hope of being employed by the British government.

I sat at the right hand end of the long table, lost in delight of my first sight of the massed people. At the far end was Mr Workman, my chief for the operation. I waited for him to speak, thinking about the time when my Gilbertese would allow me to address such a gathering. I had no idea that the time for this was closer than I thought.

"And now, Mr Grimble," Mr Workman said "As you have passed your initial interpreter's test, you will doubtless wish to tell the assembled people how glad you are to be here among them for the first time today."

My whole being cringed at once. I pleaded that I should be spared this honour. I said that every word of the language had now gone out of my head. I said my memory was always like that and that it ran in the family. Two of my uncles suffered the same way. As such I implored Mr Workman to say the gracious words for me himself.

"My dear fellow," he said "I don't talk Gilbertese in public. It's far too dangerous. I *invariably* speak through my interpreter. And by the way – before you ask – no, you may not use my interpreter."

So I got up amid a great hush and said (the words are burned on my memory), "People of Tarawa, this is a beautiful island. This is the first time I have seen Tarawa. I think Tarawa is a beautiful island. This is the first time I have seen it. I think it is very beautiful. I have never seen it before. I think it is...."

There are no means of estimating exactly how long I should have continued wittering in this fashion had not Mr Workman's voice cut in: "Perhaps, Mr Grimble, we might now pass on to the next thought. Time flies you know."

But I had no next thought save a desire to be finished. "I think it is very, very beautiful," I reminded the audience. "This is the first time I have seen Tarawa. I am glad to meet you today and shall always be very, very glad to meet you." After this eloquent finish I promptly sat down.

I was, of course, aware of some difference of quality between this performance and how I had hoped it would be, but I did not expect the laughter that followed. The whole roof seemed to rock with it. Even Mr Workman, my usually impassive chief, was twisting on his chair. Everyone else at the table was convulsed with laughter as well. It seemed an ungracious response to my constantly favourable comments about Tarawa, however badly they may have been conveyed. I got up amid the din and walked along to Mr. Workman: "You seem to be having an awful lot of fun sir," I said bitterly, "I wonder if you could spare time to tell me why, if it isn't too

much trouble.”

He pulled himself together, wiped his eyes and explained. It all turned out to be because of the wrong use of one word. What I had said in effect was, “I am glad to meet you today, but I shall always be very, very glad to say good-bye to you.”