

A Pattern of Islands *by Arthur Grimble*

Part 4 - A meal to remember

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 1915 the Gilbert and Ellice islands were turned into a colony, but this made little difference to the workings of the Commission, in fact more officials were sent to the headquarters on Ocean Island. To make room for these extra people, Grimble's boss sends him to the island of Tarawa to act as District Officer. As you can imagine food is scarce and Grimble and his wife have a special meal to prepare

It was early 1916 when I was sent to the islands of Tarawa to relieve one of my colleagues. I had passed my final language test some two months previously and my boss thought I was ready. We set sail towards the end of March. "We" by that time included Joan Ruth, aged eleven months, in addition to my wife Olivia and myself.

There was plenty of food on the islands but it was very different food. It was the vegetables that we missed the most and we had to make do with pumpkins, breadfruit and pawpaws, and that was only when they were in season. When they weren't in season we often had tinned food, but tinned goods in those days were not the same as they are now. With the honourable exceptions of asparagus and beetroot, the canned vegetables resembled nothing of their former selves. And since asparagus was scarce it was tinned beetroot that became a regular at our table.

It was some six months later when my boss, the Resident Commissioner, had to pay his obligatory visit. He was due to stay two days and a night, and on that evening we were expected to feed him. It was to be a meal we would all remember and a meal where the tinned beetroot made a guest appearance.

It all began with a quarrel in the back premises. About three hours before dinner our nursemaid Faasolo had discovered our cook, Sila, who was also her husband, talking alone behind the kitchen with a lady from the village and a jealous row ensued.

Faasolo was a gentle, smiling woman most days of the year and Sila had always seemed to us an exemplary husband. But when she saw him with this lady visitor she grabbed the lady by the hair and began flogging her with a broom-handle until we intervened. Fortunately, our formidable Chief was not there to hear her roars of rage or the screams of her victim. My boss had taken a stroll round the hospital and by the time he returned, the unwelcome girl was gone and Sila was doing his best to placate Faasolo.

But their making up could not last for long. Dinner had to be cooked – and what a dinner too! Our Chief had most kindly brought with him from Ocean Island an exquisite little shoulder of frozen lamb, *and* some onions, *and* some potatoes, *AND* a real tin of French petit pois. There was to be no tinned beetroot for this meal. Beyond which, to crown perfection, there was our plum pudding, tinned but delicious. It was intended to be hoarded for Christmas, but Olivia persuaded me to sacrifice it for the sake of the meal. The Chief liked a good sweet, she said, and she was right.

The joint was popped into the oven about an hour and a half before dinner, with Sila on guard.. Last instructions were given. We bathed, changed, had a final look at the dinner-table and passed out to the cool downstairs loggia where we relaxed

a while with drinks beside us.

The hour after sunset was always the best for my boss. That evening, he was mellower than I had ever seen him. He began to talk quietly about the rewards of living in the tropics, the relief of darkness and the night breeze after the day's glare.

"It makes you not want to return to civilisation," he said "There's something about all these big simplicities being enough for anyone, don't you think Grimble?"

I nodded, and as we took to our seats at the rose-lit dining table, I felt that we were all one together in this land that was no longer strange for any of us. And to top it all we had soup, roast lamb and plum pudding to look forward to.

I was lapping up the last spoonfuls of my soup when the cook, Sila, appeared at the door naked to the waist and in not a very clean state. He made no apology for intruding like that, but spoke in English, presumably in honour of our guest: "Missus, come quick!" he cried urgently. "Gravy, no bloody good!" and bolted back to the kitchen.

Olivia rushed wildly after him. My boss lit a cigarette and smoked quietly. I became aware of tension. I was tense myself. Gravy is important.

Looking back on it, I realize that Sila's report did little justice to the reality of the situation. For gravy to be good or bad there must be some of it, and in this case there was none at all. But he was not really to blame, and neither was Faasolo. She had come to the kitchen at seven 'o' clock intending to leave as soon as he filled her lamp. But her heart was bursting with heavy new thoughts about his lady visitor. She stayed to confide them to him. He paused in his work to reply. One thing led to the next; she went on, he went on. They lost themselves in each other, oblivious to all else until disaster fell upon them. It was the greasy fumes from the oven that told them what had happened. The shoulder of our little lamb was burned to a cinder and one cannot make gravy with ashes.

However the meal had to go on. We finished our gross substitutes for lamb and petit pois with little joy. My boss rose at the end and said he thought that that would be about enough for the evening. Olivia, I could see, was keen to let him go, and be damned to the plum pudding. But something in me rebelled at the total waste of that one remaining treasure. So, despite my wife's reproachful glances, I told him the history of it. In the end, I was glad I had done, because his temper visibly softened and he consented to stay on. We all sat down again.

There was a longish wait before the pudding arrived. Sila came along at last to explain the delay. His first attempt at sauce had gone wrong, so he had made another just as good.

"Well, well, better late than never!" observed my boss brightly when it was uncovered. "And, my word! What have we here? The sauce looks very handsome, I must say." And so it did, swimming crimson-red around the pudding.

"Yes, he good, Sah," volunteered Sila, "I makem myself. I boilem with plenty of sugar."

"Some kind of wine sauce eh?" My boss seemed to have recaptured his benevolence and I could see Olivia was glad now that I had got him to stay for dessert.

"No Sah," replied Sila, "he not wine – he juice. He beetroot juice outem tin."
It was then that my boss walked out, and Olivia wept.