

Belching for your Country

Arthur Grimble

I.

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 IS BASED ON OCEAN ISLAND WITH HIS BOSS, THE RESIDENT COMMISSIONER, AND HAS BEEN TAKING LESSONS IN THE LOCAL LANGUAGE OF GILBERTISE.

Of course one of the big problems I saw in my job was understanding the local people and one of the first things I asked my boss on my arrival was if I could get lessons in Gilbertise from someone on the island. I worked hard at my Gilbertise, and in four months could make a crude show of talking it, but language wasn't everything and my boss decided that I should start learning about native customs as well. He told me to take lessons from the kaubure or the village headman. On the day arranged, I went to the kaubure's house in the village an hour or so before sunset.

When I got there a little golden girl of seven, naked except for some white flowers on her head, invited me into the hut. As she spread a fine guest-mat for me to sit upon, she told me her name was 'Movementof-Clouds'. Seating cross-legged on another mat, she explained that her grandfather had told her to entertain me with conversation until he returned from fishing. He would not be very long now, she assured me, and would I like to drink a coconut while I was waiting? When I said yes, she climbed down from the hut, opened a nut under the trees outside with a cutlass-knife. And brought it in. She sat down again and offered it to me with her head a little bowed. "You shall be blessed," she murmured as I took it. I did say "Thank you" in reply, but that was all. I then swigged it back and handed it back empty, saying "Thank you", again.

The girl sat with both arms clasping the nut to her little chest examining me over the top of it.

"Alas!" she said at last in a shocked whisper. "Alas! Is that the manners of the young foreigner?"

She then explained that according to custom I should have returned her blessing word for word, and, after that, I should have returned the nut also, for her to take the first sip of courtesy before I drank from it. But that was not yet the full tale. My final discourtesy had been the crudest of all. In handing back the empty nut, I had omitted to belch aloud.

"How could I know when you did not belch," she said "that my food was sweet to you? See, this is how you should have done it!"

She held the nut towards me with both hands, her eyes fixed on mine, and gave a belch so resonant that it seemed to shake her from stem to stern.

"That," she finished, "is our idea of good manners," and then she began to cry.

She was upset because this was the first time her grandfather had ever given her the responsibility to receive a guest of his and she felt she had failed to entertain me properly. But one redeeming course seemed still open: I begged her to give me another chance to show my manners when her grandfather returned, and luckily the idea appealed to her.

On his arrival, she sat him on his mat, smiled at me and clambered down from the floor to fetch a nut for each of us. I made no mistakes that time; the volume of my final effort shocked me, but it pleased her grandfather profoundly and the girl slapped her hands in happiness.

I went back to write my report on my 'lessons in etiquette' which my boss had demanded. I wrote rather 'fully' about the coconut incident, under the heading "Honourable Eructation" and when I handed them to my boss he said he wanted to check up on this particular form of etiquette.

So, one day, we went together to the village headman's house for an official try-out. In the village, a visit from the Resident Commissioner was a big event, and a lot of relatives were there. I found it all rather daunting and was worried that the presence of my boss might inhibit my output of good manners at the crucial moment. However when I heard the compromise of a noise my boss made on handing back his nut, like a politely frustrated hiccough, I felt that only I could save the name of the Colonial Service.

And indeed my effort was that of a champion. It astounded even our hosts. The little girl shrieked for joy and the rest were convulsed with a mixture of laughter and fulfilment. People from other houses came crowding round to share the joke and soon the whole village was rocking with my excess of good manners. But my chief was not so happy. I explained to him that it was just one of nature's relieving accidents - the trick of an ailing stomach.