

## THE BABAI-SLASHERS.

The Commanding Officer of one of Her Majesty's men-of-war operating in the Pacific in the last century once described Nauru as "that bloodstained island". If, however, he were operating in the Pacific today, he would quickly be made aware that Nauru would certainly have to renounce that title in favour of the island of Tarawa in the Gilbert group; for there, in World War II, on the tiny islet of Betio, only a few hundred yards long and some 250 yards wide and forming the south-western corner of the island, nearly 4000 United States marines fell, together with hundreds of Japanese who were killed in battle or committed self-immolation, and some twenty Europeans whom the Japanese murdered when they invaded and occupied the island in 1942.

This tale is, however, in no way concerned with the shedding of blood. It tells of the island of Tarawa and its inhabitants in the tranquil times of peace before World War II.

Tarawa, like other islands in the Gilbert group, was, and still is, remote, insular and far from any of the normal trade routes. And, until it achieved notoriety as the first step in the American thrust under Admiral Nimitz towards Tokyo, probably not many folk had ever heard of it. Indeed, when the Director of Recruitment at the Colonial Office offered me a post as a Cadet Officer in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1932, my immediate response, even though I had taken a degree, *inter alia*, in geography at Cambridge, was to ask him where on earth on the globe the Gilbert and Ellice Islands might be found.

But it is necessary by way of a prologue to this tale to describe briefly the Gilbert Islands, their economy, the environment in which their people lived, and their way of life.

Tarawa is a typical Central Pacific atoll - a small and narrow platform of coral, standing no more than a few feet above sea level. It comprises some thirty-eight islets, stretching some 20 miles from north-west to south-east, and some thirteen miles from east to west, with the lee side of the triangle, pierced by a ships' passage, open to the ocean. The islets themselves are sparsely covered with sand and scrub, though well clothed with coconut trees.

The islands possess no natural harbours, nor natural resources, save and except for fish and copra, several hundreds of tons of the latter being exported each year.

The Gilbertese, copper-skinned Micronesians, have none of the physical graces of the Polynesian, being shorter and more muscular, but they are superb canoeists, sailors and fishermen. Unlike their extravert Polynesian neighbours in the adjacent Ellice Islands, the Gilbertese are inclined to be shy with, and appear dour to, strangers but, once their confidence is gained, it would be difficult to find more loyal and enjoyable companions. Normally of a happy and carefree disposition, their temper could always be quickly roused, however, by any attempt by others to question their title to their lands, or through jealousy at any interference with their womenfolk. (Here I might mention in passing that a not uncommon punishment visited on an erring wife was for the husband to bite off the lady's nose, the effects of which I myself witnessed on more than one occasion).

Apart from fishing and the collection of coconuts, their life then consisted largely of building or repairing their simple native-style thatched dwellings; undertaking with their fellows communal works on public buildings such as the hospital, or on the island tracks; building, making or repairing, canoes, sails, fishing nets, etc.; and making some copra.



Though mostly splendid physical specimens, their diet was curiously monotonous, consisting almost wholly and always of fish and coconuts, at times supplemented with some babai (colocasia indica, a large root vegetable resembling a coarse form of dalo), and on rare occasions by a little pork or some muscular chickens and their coconut-flavoured eggs. The babai, boiled, mashed and mixed with toddy from the coconut palm (kamaimai) formed a kind of pudding (buatoro) which, though very solid fare, was sustaining and highly regarded by the Gilbertese. Fresh toddy, won from the spathe of the coconut palm was an essential ingredient of the diet of all families. If allowed to ferment and become sour toddy, however, it was an exceedingly nasty and very potent intoxicant; indeed, probably a majority of the murders or murderous assaults committed in the islands were the result of the consumption of sour toddy, which seemed to make men berserk. I tasted it once or twice, but found it to be of a nasty acidulous flavour leaving an unpleasant taste in one's mouth; it gave me a raging headache but nothing more by which to recall it. I certainly got no 'lift' from consuming it, but then maybe I was too cautious and did not imbibe enough to induce such a frame of mind.

The scope for employment in the islands was very restricted, being limited to a few clerical or teaching posts in Government, or posts of constable in the Colony Police Force; there were also a few very lowly paid posts in the native administration or island police. In addition, there were a few jobs with the traders on shore or on their small inter-island steamers or sailing ships. So, apart from those fortunate enough to be so employed, whose wages in any case were extremely modest, the income of the average family probably in most cases did not then exceed £10 per annum; and in the world depression of the late twenties and early thirties to which this tale relates, their wants were necessarily few, grass skirts and coconut oil taking the place of clothes and kerosene (for lighting and cooking).

Before the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1892, each family lived on its own ancestral lands. There were very few waterside villages and the only buildings ordinarily near the sea were the canoe-sheds. Adjacent to the dwellings were to be found the pits, filled with rubbish or humus from the coconuts, in which the babai was grown. Ownership of a babai-pit or of a share therein was, as will be apparent from the description of the villager's diet, a much prized possession. In due course, however, the Government decided that, for a variety of reasons such as public health and law and order, the people should be required to live in villages on the lagoon shore at some distance from their ancestral lands and babai-pits. At the same time regulations were made by the native administrations on each island imposing a curfew at 9 p.m. each evening, save on very special occasions.

The headquarters of the two principal firms trading in the Colony were established on the islands of Tarawa (on the islet of Betio) and Butaritari, whence their small steamers or sailing ships visited the other islands to sell such trade goods as the islanders could then afford and to collect copra for storage at the two main islands. Then once, and sometimes twice, a year a cargo vessel of the Bank Line would visit Tarawa to discharge its modest cargo of trade goods and foodstuffs, and load the copra, usually for European ports. And it was the arrival of such a vessel that gives rise to this tale.



Entering the narrow ships' channel into Tarawa lagoon was comparatively simple, but unfortunately such cargo vessels had to anchor several hundred yards distant from the trading firm's jetty on Betio, whither all the cargo had to be landed and whence all the copra had to be shipped. The bagging of the copra on shore was undertaken by permanent employees of the company, and the carriage of the cargo to shore, or copra to the vessel, was also undertaken by a few permanent employees who were usually engaged in visiting the islands with the inter-island steamers or sailing ships. For working the winches, and other work, on board the visiting cargo vessels, the company temporarily engaged labour on the infrequent occasions when such vessels called at the island.

On the particular occasion to which this tale relates when the cargo vessel had called, the company had engaged sixteen natives for work on the vessel. Most had served in such a capacity previously. The vessel arrived and anchored just after daybreak and the work of discharging the cargo commenced not long afterwards. All went well for the first day and night, but, early on the morning of the second day the company manager was notified that those working on board the vessel would cease to do so at noon unless their wages were materially increased. It has already been related that employment opportunities in the islands were few and far between and that, owing to the world wide depression and the price of copra, wages were very low. For these reasons it was impossible not to sympathize with the workers' demand for higher wages. On the other hand, each had signed a short-term contract in which the wages for the work were specified, and the manager of the company was not unnaturally somewhat angry that, within less than 48 hours of signing the contracts and with only twelve hours notice to cease work, the employees were in effect holding the company to ransom. Thus commenced the first labour strike in the history of the Gilbert Islands.

However, faced with the prospect of paying heavy demurrage in the circumstances if the strike was prolonged, the manager did not hesitate; he dismissed the employees, after paying them for the work they had done, and quickly recruited another sixteen men from villages up the lagoon. So, after a lapse of some eighteen hours, work was resumed with those newly recruited and it seemed probable that the ship's cargo would be brought ashore and the copra shipped, thus enabling the vessel to depart only a few hours after it was scheduled to do so. And, as it turned out, that indeed happened.

But what also happened was something totally unforeseen. On the morning after the third night that the vessel was in port, the native magistrate arrived at my office in what John Bunyan would have described as "a pelting heat" to advise me that the babai plants in all but two of the pits owned by the second group of workers on board the vessel had been slashed and destroyed during the night, and that it would be a long time before any new plants replacing those destroyed grew to a size where the roots became sizable and edible.

One did not need to be a detective to deduce that such destruction was almost certainly the work of the natives dismissed



from employment on the ship in revenge on those who had taken their place, but obtaining proof of such suspicions was quite a different matter, especially as the work of destruction had almost certainly been undertaken at dead of night with the curfew in force. Clearly the first thing to be done was to obtain the names of the sixteen men who had been originally employed on the vessel, the names of their villages, and similar information regarding their replacements. On advising the manager of the trading firm of what had happened, he was only too ready to furnish such information. Nevertheless he was worried lest the destruction of their crops should cause the second group working on the vessel to cease work in order to protect the two babai-pits which had survived. Fortunately, the attraction of wages overcame the disappointment and anger of the workers at what had occurred and they decided to work on.

Nevertheless the destruction of such food crops was a serious matter, and I arranged with the native magistrate that messengers should be sent to all villages throughout the island emphasizing that the nightly curfew was henceforth to be rigorously enforced and that the perpetrators of the crime would be brought to justice. Obtaining the necessary proof was, however, likely to prove difficult since any person suspected of having given any information to the authorities regarding the perpetrators might expect his babai plants to receive similar drastic treatment. On the other hand, there were two favourable factors; first, a crime such as the destruction of food crops, certainly on this scale, was regarded as thoroughly anti-social by the Gilbertese, and public support in the attempt to bring the perpetrators to justice could be expected, even though such support might be qualified and delayed to some extent by fear of reprisals; and, secondly, in an island with a comparatively small population - perhaps only some 2500 souls - it might reasonably be expected that some information regarding the perpetrators would leak out sooner or later through "the coconut wireless".

Both groups of workers on the vessel were drawn from villages along the southern shore of the island east of Betio, where the babai-pits had also been devastated, and I arranged with the native magistrate that the kaubure (elected village headmen and members of the island's court) and the village police (a not very effective body) should keep their eyes and ears open for the faintest hint as to those who were guilty of the crime. However, fear that their babai plants would be similarly treated precluded any witnesses from coming forward; and, though rumours abounded, proof was lacking. I believe that the court would, if the first group of sixteen men had been arraigned before it, have convicted them on the basis of the rumours and the very strong probability that those men had committed the crime. But this would almost certainly have resulted in an appeal against conviction and sentence to me in my capacity as District Officer of Tarawa, and I should most reluctantly have been obliged to uphold the appeal if the convictions had been based merely on rumour and probability. In any case, I thought that any premature action might well result in further outbreaks and I was confident that sooner or later the truth would leak out.

I had, however, at my disposal on Tarawa a small detachment of ten Colony policemen (a disciplined body of rather higher calibre than the village police); and, during the three weeks



following the crime, I sent them out on night patrols in an endeavour to ensure that there were no more outbreaks, rather than in the hope of gaining proof of the crime.

I was, however, somewhat startled one morning when Lance Corporal Teikarawa visited my office and made his report about his previous night's patrol. He said that he had left the village of Teoraereke about midnight; there was no moon and he set out for the next village of Eita, which lay to the eastward and was the largest village along the south coast. It was, however, separated by a channel between the lagoon and the ocean before the village was reached. The channel was some 80 yards wide, and at that time it was about half-tide. On cautiously and quietly approaching the channel, he said that he had espied "a blue light" hovering some 12 feet above the water in mid-channel. He stared at it for some time, but it did not move and he was quite unable to fathom its provenance. It appeared to be suspended in mid-air without any visible support. Teikarawa was no coward, but many Gilbertese, including policemen, firmly believed in anti or spirits, and he was no exception. However, feeling that this disembodied light must have spied or sensed him, he decided that it was his duty to investigate it in case it might in some way be concerned with the crime (part of which had taken place in Eita village). Nervously, indeed I think rather bravely, he crept forward in the shadow of the coconut trees and bush until he reached the edge of the channel. The light remained steady and stationary; but, as he entered the water, the light correspondingly receded. When he stopped, the light stopped; when he advanced the light receded; when he retreated, the light followed him. Finally, convinced that "the blue light" was an anti bent upon drowning him in mid-channel, he beat a hasty retreat from the channel and never saw "the blue light" again. He made his report in a serious, though staccato and somewhat emotional, tone and there was no gainsaying but that he was convinced of what he saw and what he feared. I thanked him equally seriously and promised to ponder over the problem.

After much thought and though I found it impossible to credit the story of "the blue light", I decided that I had better pay a visit to the village of Eita myself at dead of night to see if I could solve the riddle (if such there was) and determine whether it was related to the crime which we were striving to solve. Thus, it seemed just conceivable that the criminals had taken some kind of action as is commonly taken on Hallowe'en, in order to discourage nocturnal prowlers out to trap them.

Donning an old black football jersey, some old black trousers and a pair of 'sneakers', and with my face and hands darkened, I disembarked from a canoe manned by some of my Colony police on a beach a mile short of the village of Eita. It was 11 p.m. and a moonless night. I arranged with the police to meet me at the same place at 3.30 a.m. and set off for the village. Approaching the channel near the village, I proceeded with the greatest care and caution, taking advantage of every tree and bush. Reaching the edge of the cover I lay down and surveyed the channel for the better part of an hour, but "the blue light" did not appear. It was then about half-tide and I entered the channel quietly, after removing my clothes and 'sneakers'. I had to swim some 30 or 40 yards in mid-channel but negotiated the strong current in the channel safely and lay down in hiding in the bush



on the opposite shore. When I had dried off, I dressed and made my way cautiously towards the village. The time must have been about 1 p.m. In the islands, it is never really dark; as one play has it "The dark is light enough". And some thirty minutes later I detected a shadow moving stealthily from tree to tree away from the village towards the bush. Moving closer I also saw that he was carrying a cutlass - a knife with a broad blade about 15 inches long. Thus, it really seemed as though I was about to witness the devastation of yet another pit. And that suspicion appeared to be confirmed in that the man made for such a babai-pit and quietly slid over the edge and out of sight.

Scarcely daring to breathe, I followed as quickly and silently as I could and peered over the edge of the pit. The man was squatting down with his back towards me, some three feet out from the edge of the pit and some three feet below me. He was grasping the cutlass in his right hand. I assumed that he was probably relaxing for a few moments after his stealthy journey from the village, and prior to slashing all the babai plants in the pit. Impatient to forestall such action, I crouched and launched my 13 $\frac{1}{2}$  stone at him diving straight at the small of his back. He must have had most of the wind knocked out of him for he uttered no sound; in any case he was prostrate on his stomach with his face buried in the mud and humus in the bottom of the pit. Fortunately, he had lost his grasp on the cutlass in the fall, and it lay a short distance away.

I felt triumphant at having caught one of the babai-slashers at dead of night about to commit a further crime. Pulling the native back from his somewhat suffocating position, I regarded him closely, quickly uttering the warning "Tai karongoa" (keep quiet). However, he could scarcely do anything else for a minute or two whilst he struggled to regain his breath, and felt to see whether his backbone was still whole and in place.

He was a man of about middle age, however, and did not look like the type I had expected to meet with. Whilst he was still breathless I explained to him that I was the District Officer of Tarawa (for we had never met before) and that my purpose was to try and arrest one or more of those who had committed the crime of devastation of the babai-pits. When I had told him who I was, and of my mission, and asked his name and those of his relations and friends, he quickly denied that he had anything to do with such a crime. Though he could produce no proof of any description, he said that the names of those who had done so were universally known throughout the village, though no villager was courageous enough to name them publicly. But the more I questioned him, the less I was inclined to believe that he was one of the first group of sixteen workers on the vessel, though he might have been an accessory in the matter.

He then rocked me back on my heels by insisting that he was no babai-slasher, but quietly crept out of his dwelling at dead of night because he had had "a bad stomach" and wished to relieve nature! and, he said, where more safely hidden to obey the call of nature than in a babai-pit. Normally, he said he would have gone to the seashore but, with the strict curfew, he would easily have been spotted there. And the proof of his words was where he had been squatting in the pit!



I was bitterly disappointed at my failure to catch one of the suspects red-handed, but the attitude and denials of the man were convincing. Sooner or later, he had said, the names of the guilty parties and proof of their wrongdoing was bound to leak out. So, after conversing with him for a short while, I warned him in the most stringent terms that he was on no account whatever to mention our meeting to anyone and threatened that, if he did so, it would have the most serious consequences, especially as far as he was concerned. He promised to keep quiet and to this day I believe that he did so.

So I waded and swam back across the channel a very crestfallen man and made my way to the beach where the canoe manned by police arrived soon afterwards and took me back to my headquarters. Nor did I see "the blue light" on my return journey - a phenomenon which was never solved.

As the days passed by the common talk of the villagers, as well as of the police detachment, concerning the crime continued to grow in intensity. The people of Tarawa were unable to comprehend why, when the suspects were so obviously the sixteen original workers on the vessel, they were not immediately arrested, brought before the native court and duly punished. In the view of the public the minor aspect of actual proof of their guilt was not considered sufficient to outweigh the reputation of the Government that justice should be done.

Eventually I decided that I must try and bring things to a head by acting as a catalyst in the affair. However, failure would be disastrous since, if the suspects were once summoned before the native court and found not guilty, they could not very well be charged a second time with the same crime. Even though there was nothing in the native laws to forbid this, I felt that I should be stretching my luck too far with higher authority to resort to any such strategem. Clearly, therefore, any action on my part to bring matters to a head needed the most careful consideration and detailed planning. Equally clearly, evidence was unlikely to be forthcoming from members of the general public, almost certainly none of whom actually witnessed the crimes committed. Confessions by the suspects were also highly unlikely, so the only solution appeared to be to create a situation or set of circumstances, including psychological pressure, in which one or more of the suspects would give the game away.

After a great deal of thought I evolved a plan which seemed to me to stand a reasonable chance of success and which, if it should fail in its object, would in no way compromise further action in due course. The plan and its fulfilment are described in the following paragraphs of this tale.

It seemed to me that the first move must be to bring in to headquarters at Betio from their villages all the sixteen original workers on the cargo vessel. By this action I hoped that they would conclude that Government was in little doubt that it was their group which it held, if not guilty, at least in deep suspicion. At the same time, I felt that it was vital to keep the groups - four each from four different villages - apart, so that they had no opportunity to discuss this latest move on the part of Government and what it might portend. It seemed to me that it could



well increase a sense of uneasiness amongst the suspects, especially if the groups were kept separate.

Accordingly I instructed my police to proceed in pairs to the villages in question and bring the four groups of suspects to Betio. I further instructed my police that they were to keep their eyes and ears open during the journey as far as each group was concerned and, in reply to enquiries from any member of a group, were to confine themselves to stating that they knew no more than that the Commissioner (as the District Officers were known) had ordered that they should be brought into headquarters for interrogation. If the police were also able to give the impression that the Commissioner had found out something of importance about the crime, they might do so but great care would have to be exercised in so doing. Finally, I told the police that they should arrive at Betio at roughly hourly intervals, commencing at noon on the following Monday, and to proceed to various buildings which I indicated for each group, so that the groups should not be able to communicate with each other.

The police carried out their orders with commendable efficiency and accuracy. I then proceeded with the second stage of the plan. I called into my office the two Clerk/Interpreters then on Betio and two Colony policemen whom I had not sent out to the villages. All four were fortunately natives of Tarawa and they also knew some of the suspects - facts of very considerable importance in my plan. I explained that I wished them to sit at desks behind me, as though engaged in clerical work of some kind. I would then interview the suspects in each group one by one for about five or ten minutes each. It would be their duty to listen keenly to the voices, so that they could, even with their eyes shut, unhesitatingly identify each suspect by the characteristic quality of sounds, or timbre, of his particular voice. They should make notes in this respect if they thought it desirable since they might possibly be questioned on the matter of identification later on.

One of the the two policemen in charge of each group of four suspects was directed to bring the members of his group to my office one at a time, whilst the second policeman remained with the other three suspects. The latter policeman had been advised that there was no objection to allowing the members of the group to converse freely in his presence, and even to encouraging it when each one of those interviewed returned to the group; when that happened, the remaining suspects in the group would, I felt sure, undoubtedly wish to know in as much detail what had transpired at the interview; and I hope that unguarded questions and answers might provide some of the evidence which I sought.

Before interviewing each suspect, I assured him that he was under no obligation to answer any question I might ask of him, but stressed that any information which he might be able to give me and which enabled me to solve the mystery of the devastation of the babai-pits, which had greatly shocked the Tarawa public - a point on which I laid great emphasis - would be most welcome. Each one of the suspects, clearly anxious to prove his innocence and equally clearly anxious to ascertain to what extent he and his fellows were suspected, asserted that he was only too willing to be of assistance.



It is not possible in the compass of this short tale to record full details of the interviews of the sixteen suspects. At the interviews, which all followed much the same pattern, I commenced by asking the usual routine questions such as the name, village, and relations of the suspect. I then passed on to the matter of the strike on board the vessel, and the demand, and justification, for higher wages. I then pointed out the curious coincidence that the devastated pits were in the four villages from which the first and second groups of workers both came, and that all the devastated pits belonged to the second group of workers, but none to the workers in the first group. I said that such extraordinary coincidences had inevitably given rise to strong and widespread rumours that the first group of workers off the vessel were either guilty, or at least might have some inside knowledge, in the matter. As for evidence as to the culprits, I concluded by saying that all the kaubure and village policemen had had their eyes and ears to the ground, that Colony police patrols had done likewise - all with considerable success, which I did not elaborate, and that, as a result, Government would shortly, it was hoped and confident, be able to bring the perpetrators of the crime to justice.

Almost inevitably on the return of an interviewed suspect to his group those who had stayed behind were, as I had anticipated, bursting with questions concerning the interview. Whilst slow to ask questions in a subdued tone of those interviewed, some were too seized by anxiety to resist the temptation. Questions asked, and noted by the policeman in charge of the first group, included, for example "Does the Government know...?"; "How much does the Government know?"; "Does the Government know that we....?"; "Why have we been chosen to be interviewed?"; "Has the Government any evidence against us?"; "Did you give any of us away?"; and so on. And some of the replies, though guarded, were obviously unconvincing to the hearers, and helped to provide background or secondary evidence which could be used as the basis for questions in court.

Each one of the sixteen suspects was interviewed by me along the same lines and their subsequent conversations with their colleagues were listened to, and noted, by the policeman in charge of the group. Meanwhile, the two Clerk/Interpreters and two policemen who had attended the interviews maintained notes on the voices of the various suspects.

At the conclusion of the interviews, I held a meeting in my office attended by the four persons last-mentioned, together with the four policemen who had remained in charge of the four groups of suspects. I also invited the native magistrate and the chief of kaubure (who, in a native court, held a position somewhat analogous to the foreman of a jury) to attend, since I knew that a meeting of that court had been fixed for 10 a.m. the following morning and I planned that all the suspects should be arraigned before that court. I explained to the two native officials what action had hitherto been taken with regard to the suspects, and proposed that each of them should be arraigned one by one before the court on the following morning. I then invited the four policemen who had been in charge of the four groups of suspects to report in as much detail as possible on conversations held within the groups for which they were responsible. This was done and notes were taken of various statements, questions and answers, etc., and the names of the speakers, so that such evidence might be used in court on the following morning. Such information was then recorded in succinct

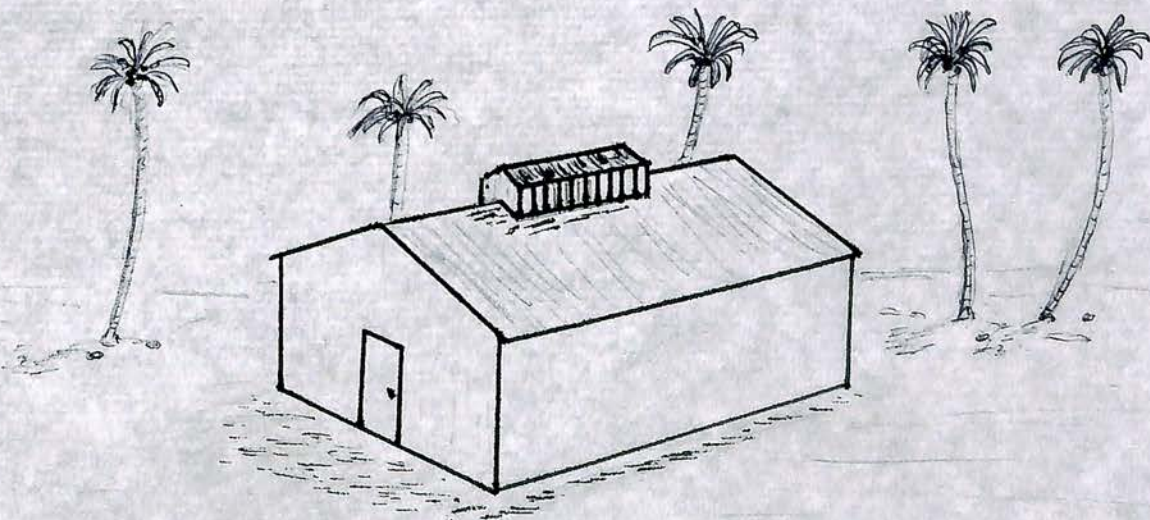


form and handed to the native magistrate and chief of kaubure to enable it be used as the basis for questions to be asked in court on the following morning, since a number of the statements, questions and answers, etc., would at least embarrass the suspects and make it difficult for them to explain away.

The four groups of suspects were then given a meal of coconuts, fish and rice, though contact between the groups was still not permitted. All sixteen were then summoned to my office and I informed them that they would be charged individually in the native court the following morning under the native law dealing with the destruction of food crops. I further informed them that they might later be charged with conspiracy, having apparently combined to effect an unlawful purpose, but that I had not yet taken a decision in that respect. I pointed out, however, that, if found guilty of conspiracy, they might suffer considerable sentences of imprisonment.

Darkness having by then fallen, I told them that they would be locked up overnight in the gaol for male prisoners. The few prisoners who had been in occupation of the gaol had already been transferred to the gaol at the native government station at Abookoro, halfway up the north-western/south eastern arm of the atoll. All were then conducted in a single group to the gaol and locked in.

The gaol, located on the Government station near the shore, and some distance from all other buildings, was a fairly ancient low wooden building, with a single door at one end. It was sufficient to accommodate some thirty occupants. Astride the ridge of the gaol roof, which was somewhat flattish, was a rectangular pitched-roof structure, rather like a chicken coop, with vertical iron bars along both sides to allow ample ventilation for the occupants. The building which is easier to sketch than describe, resembled the following drawing -



It should be pointed out, however, that, in view of the age and structure of the building, if one or more prisoners decided to break out, no difficulty would be experienced. There was little point in their doing so, however, since any prisoner would probably have been recaptured on the islet of Betio or, failing that, elsewhere on the island of Tarawa.



Whilst I was addressing the full group of sixteen suspects in my office, the Clerk/Interpreters and their two police colleagues had not been idle. Under cover of darkness, they had proceeded to the depot of the Public Works Department, also on the Government station, which had been unlocked in anticipation of their visit. There they discarded their clothes and uniforms until they were dressed in nothing save the briefest of black under-pants, not unlike bikinis. They next laid hands on two short ladders. As the depot was within sight of the gaol, they were able to discern the arrival and entry of the suspects into the building in the gloom and, after hearing the guard party bid the suspects goodnight and ostentatiously depart, they rapidly crossed the intervening lawn to the gaol, bearing the ladders with them. Anticipating that the suspects would lose little or no time in discussing the events of the day and what they portended, they lost no time in silently placing their ladders against the walls of the gaol. Noiselessly and with the agility of cats, one Clerk/Interpreter and one policeman climbed up the ladder on either side and prostrated themselves on the flattish section of the gaol roof adjacent to the 'chicken coop'. Each carried nothing but a small pad and a pencil for making jottings of conversations and identification of the speakers.

As anticipated, conversation was slow to start, but it was not long before the subject of the devastation of the babai-pits was being discussed. What puzzled and worried the speakers, whose voices could be clearly heard by those on the gaol roof, was what had, after a considerable period of time when inaction had supervened, given rise to the sudden detention of the whole group. Whilst it was admitted that they were the natural suspects, nothing had been given away at the interviews that the Government had suddenly acquired some actual vital evidence of their wrongdoing. This aspect of the matter was discussed at great length, not without suggestions that someone, either a member of the group or of the public, had given them away. An additional cause of their anxiety, also discussed at some length, was that they might later be charged with conspiracy and, if found guilty, face a heavy sentence of imprisonment. They had also been told that they would be arraigned before the native court one at a time, which further disturbed them, for by such an arrangement those brought later before the court would be unaware of just what the preceding accused had said or admitted - for it was suggested, as it turned out quite correctly - that as soon as the case of one accused was concluded, he would not be returned to the gaol but be taken elsewhere. Nor, of course, was it known in what order they would be appearing in court and so were unable to make any plans as to giving evidence. By this time, anxieties and emotions were running somewhat high, and it was not long before indiscreet remarks and admissions were being flung around between members of the group. In this names too were freely interchanged. The pencils of those on the roof were soon kept busy.

After much talk, however, it was decided that there was little in the way of a plan which they could make before being brought before the court, without knowing just what evidence the Government might have against them. It was finally agreed that each should firmly plead 'not guilty' in turn, and thereafter remain as taciturn as possible. Thereafter the conversation subsided and all turned in to a troubled sleep.



The listeners on the roof then descended, replaced the ladders at the depot, dressed and repaired to my quarters where I anxiously awaited news of what had occurred. Here the notes of the listeners were eagerly read and discussed; the names of almost all the speakers were briefly recorded, in addition to their statements and charges. All such evidence was then synthesized and arrangements were made, and notes taken, as to who should, if necessary, give evidence in court as to the various speakers and what they had said. There was no question but there was now ample evidence upon which to convict them in court, even though in a number of cases it might be possible to dispense with it. And so to bed and until the meeting of the court at 10 a.m. on the following morning.

The evening before I had asked the native magistrate and the chief of kaubure to attend at my office the following morning at 9 a.m. and this they did. I then explained to both of them what had transpired the evening before in, and on top of, the gaol and suggested to them the manner in which the prosecution of those charged should be followed. I said it was almost certain that all the accused would plead 'not guilty'. They should then pursue the cases on the same lines that I had in my interviews with each suspect on the day before. After finally emphasizing the strong and widespread nature of the rumours as to the guilt of the accused, they should ask them if they still wished to adhere to their plea of 'not guilty'. If they did so, the native magistrate should then announce that there were witnesses as to various statements made by the accused, in which the names of those of some or all of the sixteen suspects and their actions in the matter were mentioned. One or more of the listeners of the evening before should then be brought into court, sworn and asked to make statements. In this connexion, the witnesses had previously been instructed that they should not disclose the circumstances in which such evidence had been obtained, but merely state that they had heard the accused making such-and-such a statement the previous evening, giving details of names, etc.,

One who was suspected of being a ringleader was the first called to appear in court, and proceedings followed the pattern recited in the preceding paragraph. He finally declined to change his plea of 'not guilty', but when confronted with the first witness and his evidence was obviously badly shaken; the appearance of a second witness corroborating the evidence of the first was, however, too much for him, puzzled as he was as to how such evidence could have been obtained. Obviously nonplussed and dismayed, he offered little further resistance to questioning. He was then unanimously convicted by the court, sentenced to six months imprisonment for destruction of food crops (the maximum term), ordered to provide such supplies of babai as his village kaubure might direct to one of the injured parties, and warned that he might later be prosecuted for conspiracy. He was then led away by one of my policemen to a detached building on a distant part of the Government station.

Thereupon one of the prison warders attending the court was instructed to bring a second accused from the gaol, but not before he had been told to inform the second accused en route from the gaol to the court that the first accused had been convicted and sentenced as mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The trial of the second accused followed the same course as the first, with the same results, and he was led away to join the first. His successor was told by the accompanying prison warder that both the first two



accused had been convicted and sentenced as already mentioned. The third accused to be brought before the court had been carefully chosen as the next to stand trial. He was the youngest of the suspects and from his demeanour at my interview with him it struck me that he might well have been overpersuaded to participate in the babai-slashing against his better judgment. For this reason, and though I found it somewhat distasteful, I had suggested to the native magistrate and the chief of kaubure that he should be prosecuted in court in a somewhat tough and severe manner. This was done, and when the first witness had given evidence against him, he cracked and changed his plea of 'not guilty' to 'guilty' and named the other three men whom he had assisted in the babai-slashing, whilst adding that as a result of the discussions the evening before in the gaol, all the other twelve from the other three villages were equally guilty. Fortunately, however, it was not found necessary to use his evidence against the others.

Some of the later accused continued to plead 'not guilty' and remain as taciturn as possible in court but, when confronted by one or more witnesses, changed their plea to one of 'guilty' or simply remained silent. Others, having been informed by the prison warden bringing them to court as to the number previously convicted and sentenced, clearly felt that one of their fellow accused had given the game away, and pleaded 'not guilty' maybe in the hope of being given a lesser sentence. However, the native court was in no mind to show any mercy and all sixteen brought before the court were convicted and sentenced in the same manner as the first accused.

Thus ended the trial of the babai-slashers and great was the relief of the Tarawa public that the wrongdoers had been caught, even if by rather unorthodox methods, and put behind bars, so that their babai-pits were safe from devastation.

In this day and age 'bugging' is a commonplace to trap diplomatists and others, but was probably unusual between the wars. In any case, such artifices were unknown, and not even dreamed of, in the far Pacific in the thirties. And, whilst the means adopted to obtain evidence leading to the conviction of the criminals later caused me slight twinges of conscience, I comforted myself by arguing that the unorthodox means of obtaining the evidence justified the ends. And I like to think that, in order to bring ~~to~~ an end the alarm and uncertainty of the populace, and retribution to the evil-doers of such an anti-social crime, even Britain's man-of-the-people Master of the Rolls Lord Denning would have approved of the methods employed.