Issue 93 | February-March 2021 | 500/-

OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

MAZRUIS IN MOMBASA - 1700s

Tom Mboya | Tanganyika Bus Service

Behind the Mask | Belgian Embassy

John Gichinga & Andy Cobb | Bird Guidebooks

PAGE 53

WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 11

ISIOLO INTERLUDES

by Dr Jerry Haigh

In the last episode, Jerry Haigh treated a rhino in Meru Park that had suffered spousal abuse. The story continues....

Peter Gamble, District Veterinary Officer at Isiolo, was transferred to Nanyuki. He and his wife Judi were good friends of ours. Soon after Pete's transfer, I received an unexpected call from Kabete. It was the deputy director of Veterinary Services, Marcus Durand. "How would you like to take on the duties of DVO Isiolo for a while, on top of your work at Meru? At least until we find a replacement for Pete."

"It sounds interesting. What would my responsibilities be?"

"You should probably attend meetings and try to get down to the District Commissioner's office about one day a week. If there's anything important in the way of sales you should also try to get to those, and of course keep an eye on the quarantine if there's anything there. The job may tie in nicely with your Meru duties; there is that longish boundary between the two districts."

I accepted, and soon discovered that there were some perks to the new position. Isiolo, although only 35 miles away, was considered a "hardship" posting. This meant I could buy some things at duty free prices. These included brandy, so the luxury of an occasional after-dinner snifter became a reality.

The frequent trips to Isiolo also meant I could get to know the Carn family better. Tony Carn was the game warden for the entire district. He and his wife Velia and their daughter Sala had been the Gambles' neighbours. They lived in the game warden's house, near the veterinary house. Tony, a keen outdoorsman, was away on safari a good deal of the time.

His slight frame and rapid, determined walk, leaning forward slightly, suggested a man who could accumulate mile after mile under his belt. His English background was confirmed when I discovered that his sister was Evelyn Home, the 'agony aunt' of the well-known magazine, *Woman*. Velia, on the other hand, was a second-generation Kenyan. Her dark good looks and slim figure, as well as her expressive temperament, confirmed her Italian ancestry. They had been transferred to Isiolo in 1968, and stayed until the position was "Africanized" in 1972.

Their daughter Lorian was born a month before our Karen. Two months before Lorian's arrival, just after Tony and Velia returned from a weekend at Maralal, their house burned to the ground. Juma, their cook, had been surreptitiously cooking on Velia's stove, instead of his own, while they had been away. He must have forgotten to turn off the gas properly. As Velia explained to me, "When I went to light the gas fridge and cooker there was a whoosh of flame, and the whole building was engulfed in an instant." She demonstrated with an upward and outward fling of her hands.

They had lost almost everything: family silver, linen, furniture, and their much-loved bull terrier Tiwi, who had been locked in a back room. Skitters, the cat, had made his escape. The only things that they saved were family photos and passports, which had been in a trunk.

Wilfred Thesiger turned up unexpectedly and helped them sift through the ashes. One more treasure emerged: a jade lion had survived the heat.

About a month later Velia received an unexpected call from the British High Commission: "We want to come up and visit you next week," the official told her. "I hope that will be satisfactory." It was less a request than an ultimatum. The visit was a scouting trip to prepare the way for a VIP visitor. Six months after the fire, when a new house had been built, but by no means furnished, Prince Charles arrived with an equerry. He was on safari and getting away from the media.

"They were just like all men," said Velia, recalling the visit with an exasperated smile. "Bedroom a shambles, clothes left on the floor."

The opportunity for an interesting work-related safari soon arose. The government cattle buyer, who worked for the Livestock Marketing Division, and had been dealing with

People and their camels in the Northern Frontier District (NFD).

the people of the Northern Frontier District for many years, was Hector Douglas. He called in at the Meru office on his way back from the north.

"I'm going up to Laisamis in two weeks' time. The Samburu are having an auction up there and I need to get some cattle for shipment to the Mombasa abattoir. Can you come along and do the health checks?"

"I'll need to organize some things here. How long will we be gone?"

"Oh, not long. No more than two or three days in all. I will be going on up to Moyale, but you will be able to get back after the sale. Don't bother with cutlery and stuff. I will supply tents and just about everything except bedding. Bring your own sheets, and a blanket, as it can get nippy at night. Make sure you bring your gun: there's good sand grouse shooting at Laisamis."

Pete had warned me about certain elements of traveling with Hector. "Hector is a fascinating man," he said. "He always goes on safari with a full set of china and glasses. The plates are packed in specially made boxes with racks for each item. He likes to camp in comfort. He will also drink about three quarters of a bottle of Johnnie Walker each night, and he will definitely not offer to share it. If you want some booze, take your own. He's also a marvellous story teller, so be prepared for an interesting time."

As we sat by the fire that first evening I got a glimpse of Hector's earlier life. My own tipple was tea, and later a Tusker, but in the East African tradition of the 'sundowner' he nursed his whisky from soon after six o'clock. In the gathering dusk, the sun setting blood red against a backdrop of gradually darkening blue, stars beginning to emerge one by one as the blue turned from pale to royal to blue-black, we began to chat. More precisely, he did most of the talking, and I acted as a blotting paper and occasionally prompted him.

"First, the morning. There's no need to rush. The birds come in at almost exactly eight o'clock. You can more or less set your watch by them. They finish after an hour or so. We probably won't need to shoot that long, as there's only you and I and the camp staff to feed. We'll have a late breakfast of fried sand-grouse breasts at about nine-thirty and then move across the lugga to the auction yards. Will a cup of tea at seven suit you?"

It was more a statement than a question. I nodded.

During the course of the evening, as the level in the bottle gradually dropped, he recounted stories from the war time. At one time he and a companion, the only Britishers on Marsabit mountain, kept an Italian force away for two whole days by moving around and letting off the occasional round in the general direction of the enemy.

"Later on I had the awkward situation of dealing with a whole Eye-tie platoon on my own. I was sitting in a lugga, stark bollock naked, up to my navel in running water, when these chaps appeared over the horizon and insisted on surrendering." The Italian army in East Africa was famed for its caution and not noted for its aggressiveness.

At precisely eight o'clock Hector finished the last drop of his last glass and called, *"Chakula tayari?"* (Is food ready?)

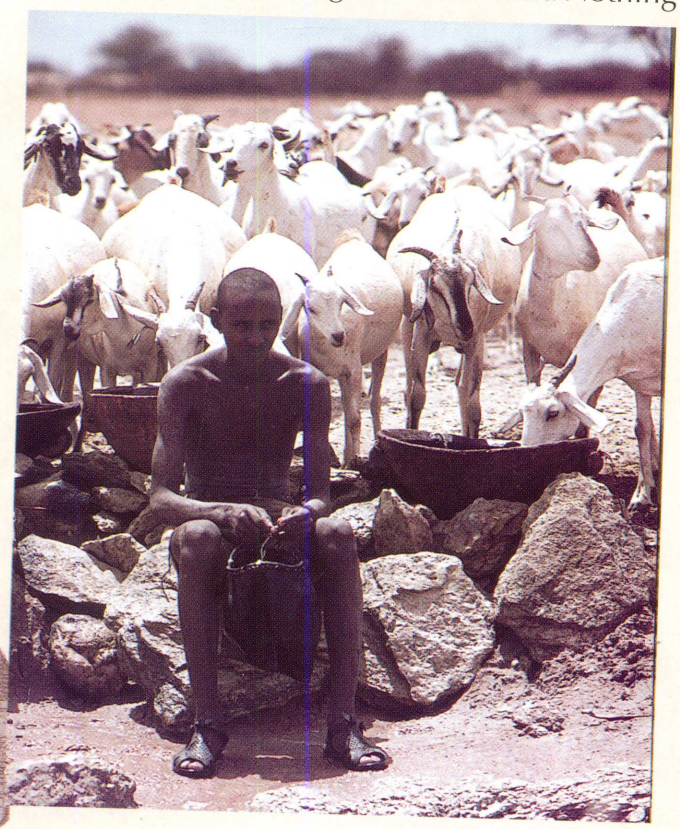
"Ndiyo, bwana," replied the cook in the affirmative.

We moved from the comfort of our canvas and wood chairs to two others, identical, but placed on either side of a wooden table set with a white tablecloth. Soon after a delicious supper of steak and baked potatoes we moved off to our tents. Sleep followed easily.

My next conscious action was to open the tent flap and take the tea from a tray presented by the cook's assistant after his friendly, *"Chai, bwana."* (Tea, sir.)

"Look sir," he said, pointing to the ground. I stood and gazed in fascination at the huge footprints of a bull elephant that had passed between Hector's tent and mine. As our guy ropes intersected, the animal had had to step extremely carefully. Neither of us had heard a thing.

Without hurry we moved off down to the lugga and prepared to get our breakfast. Nothing had prepared me for what was to come. Within 15 minutes I had shot as many grouse as I cared to. As Hector had been banging away as well I was sure that we had enough to eat. For the next 45 minutes I sat and marvelled at the sight. Wave after wave of birds came in from every corner of the compass. In the distance they appeared like little swarms of insects. These soon got close enough to be distinguished as groups of ten to thirty birds, and every now and then a small number of birds, two or four, would join a band. Occasionally the bands would coalesce. There might be as many as three or four layers of flocks flying above in different directions, like jetliners stacked above an airport. The twittering sound continued throughout. They would soon descend to the water's edge. Then there would be a general splashing and bathing. After a few minutes the entire band would rise, as if at a signal, and head off across the desert.



A herdsman with his goats near Wajir.

Breakfast that morning, for the entire camp staff, was a delicious dish of creamed sand-grouse breast, although the cream, in this environment, was actually sweetened condensed milk. Coffee never tasted better.

The sale itself was something of an anti-climax for me. Hector sat still, surrounded by his staff, and watched the proceedings. It was my job to ensure that nothing obviously sick was entered into the ring, and I had to check the mouths and feet of each animal as it entered through the crush. As Hector began paying cash for the cattle he had bought, I realized that he had, all along, been carrying a large sum of money. "Don't you ever worry, carrying so much cash?" I asked later.

"It is a helluva lot," he agreed, "but I've never even been threatened. One time I had a pretty close call. I was on my own in the middle of the night, lying on the open ground, and a band of *shifta* moved into camp. The only thing to do was to pretend to be asleep. After a while I heard one of them say, 'We will leave him alone. He brings plenty of money into this area.' I waited for a while to be sure that they had left and then broke out into a muck sweat. It's nice when even thieves know not to kill the goose that lays the golden egg."

The duties as DVO Isiolo involved other less exciting activities, such as the monthly administrative meetings with the District Commissioner. Sometimes these were frustrating, even downright maddening. On one

occasion when Tony was present, my tendency to call a spade a spade created a minor stir. The DC had asked me about the cattle dipping program in the area.

"We have had some complaints about the number of ticks on the people's cows. I arranged for the dip fluid to be tested and the results have just come in."

He handed me a report sheet which indicated that the dip was so far under strength as to be almost useless, then said, "I do not have any money in my budget for dip replacement. Would you advise the herdsmen to bring their cattle more often, say twice a week, in order to overcome the problem?"

"No," I replied. "You might as well dip the cattle in fresh water as use this solution. It is simply a waste of time to continue until you have the dip at the right strength."

I'm not sure he was used to such direct responses. I never heard if any action was taken. Tony commented as we headed back to his home for lunch, "That was refreshing; I'm not sure he appreciated the candour though."

Two weeks later, the DC called a special meeting to deal with another problem. The attendance included local missionaries of one denomination, several of another group who had come up from Nairobi, and one or two senior government administrative officers.

The problem boiled down to the inability of two rival Christian sects to agree on almost anything. One of them had a zealous young doctor ready and willing to work in the Northern Frontier District. They also had a Land Rover modified as a fully equipped mobile clinic, complete with a sliding operating table that fitted in the middle of the back section. The senior member of this delegation stated the problem "We do not have any accommodation in Isiolo for our doctor." He turned to the DC. "Can you help? Do you know of any empty housing that we might use?"

The DC looked at the senior cleric of the local mission. "I know that you have two empty houses on your compound. Can we use one of those?"

The answer was a flat no. Even after a couple of hours of circular negotiation, the answer did not change. In the end, the Nairobi delegation returned home, and the Land Rover never appeared in Isiolo. The same kind of "tribalism" which is widely condemned in both the local and international media, and which holds back cooperation between Africans, was evidently a force among the people carrying subtly different versions of the 'word' of 'their' god, or is that God?

My work in Isiolo carried on, but I still had my duties in Meru. I heard an American volunteer had died in of rabies in Machakos and decided we had to take action.

We had a yearly rabies vaccination campaign for dogs in the district and vaccinated dogs brought to the office, but in outlying areas we had work to do. We had a travelling team to vaccinate cattle against anthrax, and herders had to present all unlicensed dogs at the vaccination sites. Vaccinated and licensed dogs were supposed to wear a collar with a current tag. A County Council bylaw stated that "the Veterinary Officer may destroy by any means at his discretion" any dog not suitably identified. I contacted Kabete to find out the official policy for the destruction of untreated dogs.

The deputy director, Dr Marcus Durand, told me they used strychnine in a small parcel of meat, under very strict conditions, so as not to put other animals at risk. I sourced some of the poison and I drove to the local slaughterhouse with a team to test this process.

A pack of 15 stray unlicensed dogs soon arrived. We threw treated meat to the first two dogs to approach the Land Rover. After eating the bait the dogs ran around in a frenzy, then fell over. They recovered briefly and ran and fell for several minutes before staying down.

I had not realized what a gruesome poison we were dealing with. We had to keep the horrible scourge of rabies at bay, but I decided strychnine was not going to be used again while I was veterinary officer. The next morning I placed a call to Kabete to find another way of killing these dogs.

To be continued...