

WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 8

THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA

by Dr Jerry Haigh

In part 7 of Old Africa's condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book Wrestling with Rhinos, the author got engaged to Dr Jo Riet and met George and Joy Adamson in Meru National Park. You can order the full book from the author's website www.jerryhaigh.com or from amazon.com

1968 Jo returned before Christmas and was almost at once thrown into the medical deep end. One night I had a vivid dream of a car chase, and then the honking of horns. Suddenly I realized the horn noise was real. I struggled to wake up and heard someone pounding on the glass of the front door. I rolled out of bed, checked my *kikoi* to make sure that I was decent and walked blearily out to the veranda.

"Doctor," said a man in a khaki uniform, "Doctor Riet asked me to give you this letter."

I looked at my watch. It was 3:15 am. The letter from Jo was scribbled slantwise and obviously in some haste on the back of a prescription sheet: "Jerry, I have a kid here who has swallowed something called Kupatox. It's in a yellow tin, about ¼ pint. Pic of a cow on it. He's convulsing and we can't control it. Have you got a text book or anything on this stuff? Can you bring it?"

"Tell the doctor I will come as soon as I can," I said to the driver.

I arrived at the hospital about ten minutes later, my copy of **Garner's Veterinary Toxicology** in hand. The active ingredient of Kupatox is a synthetic substance called toxaphene, used to prevent tick-borne diseases in cattle.

The child, a chubby three-year-old, had found the interesting-looking yellow tin at home and had taken a drink. Fortunately, the distraught father had brought the tin.

Every couple of minutes the little boy would go into a violent convulsion.

"Have you got anything?" Jo asked as I walked in. Just then the child convulsed again and she tried to soothe him.

I opened the text at the appropriate page, and as Jo struggled with the child I read

out and paraphrased, in staccato bites, the relevant passages. "Toxaphene is a chlorinated hydrocarbon...these things are diffuse stimulants of the central nervous system...main expression neuro-muscular...may be explosive...speed of onset depends upon dose...occasional maniacal seizure."

"Seems to fit," I said. "Here's the treatment section." Treatment aims at controlling convulsions by means of central nervous system depressants.

I passed the book across to Jo and she read it to herself. "I think it's a bit risky giving barbiturates, the way this little fellow is throwing fits. If he jerks the needle out we'll have all kinds of trouble."

She decided to use paraldehyde. It had to go into the bloodstream for maximum effect. After a syringe had been filled another problem became evident. The boy's convulsions were so violent that it was impossible for the nursing staff to hold him still. Every time the needle got into a vein, a twist or turn would tear it through the wall of the vessel, and another potential injection site would be lost. Eventually, in desperation, Jo took a longer needle and felt for the pulse in the lad's groin. The needle went straight into the vein, which is large and lies next to the artery that she could feel thumping under her fingers. The drug went into his body, and his convulsions stopped as if by magic.

Twice more during the night she had to return to the hospital to administer further doses, but each time the movements were less violent. By the next day the worst was over. The boy recovered completely, and tests showed his liver had suffered no permanent damage. Within a couple of days he had gone home.

We soon settled back into our usual routine, eating supper at one or other of our houses most nights of the week. One evening, as she walked past me on her way to the kitchen, she noticed me scratching the top of my head. She stopped and had a close look.

"That's a funny-looking rash you've got there," she said. "It looks red and itchy. Did you bang yourself?"

We went to settle up. I took out my wallet and the clerk said something I did not catch. "How much do we owe you?" I asked.

"Nothing," said Brian as he appeared around the corner. "Just a little thank you for your help. Also, we've got something to show you."

Jo and I stepped round the counter and headed into the back office. Jenny was there holding an official-looking piece of paper. "This is Honey's pedigree. She was bred to a show champion from Nairobi. We'd like you to have one of her pups as a wedding gift. Of course they won't be ready for about six weeks, so you can pick it up later."

"That's marvellous. Very many thanks," we said, almost in unison. "There is one small problem," I continued. "We're off on honeymoon to South Africa, and then we're going to Europe to see friends and family in Britain and Holland. I don't think we'll be back until about early April. Can you look after it for us until then?"

"That's no problem at all. There is one thing we'd ask of you. Will you please take him to a puppy class show in Nairobi at the end of the year? Reputation and pedigree is very important to us and showing is all a part of that business."

Of course, we happily agreed. We left the club after lunch, and headed for Nairobi and thence south.

Upon returning from our honeymoon, Jo and I were assigned the former medical officer's house. It had a sheltered veranda that faced the setting sun and looked out towards the Kazita River where we had both walked and I had waded after trout.

Tim had looked after our dogs, Pie and Rinty, and we agreed to take Rinty, who had mellowed into a real old gentleman. We picked up our new pup, whom we named Muffin, at the Safari Club. They soon settled in together, the ten-year-old quite tolerant of the youngster.

As Jo and her colleagues sat around the coffee table on Jo's first morning back, Lily, always a bundle of energy and a source of endless laughter, said, "Oh, Dr Riet, it is good to see you back. We have missed you so much. I'm sure we will get you working hard again pretty soon."

"Did anything interesting happen while I was away?" asked Jo.

"We did see one interesting case," said Anna Nkabu the Matron. "A man from Kianjai came in with his wife and we had to do some emergency repairs after he had operated on her."

"You mean he did an operation himself?" said Jo.

"In our Meru culture a woman who dies in childbirth cannot be buried together with the baby. They must be separated before burial. This man cut open his wife when she seemed to die while trying to give birth. He removed the baby, which was dead, and then his wife



Jerry and Jo's wedding reception at Nanyuki Sports Club on 25 January 1969.

woke up. He stitched her stomach using some string and then brought her in here in a matatu. We, Erastus and I, did an operation. We put her under anaesthesia and cleaned her up."

"Had he stitched up the uterus?" queried Jo.

"No, we had to do that after we had taken the string out. At any rate, the woman recovered and we sent her home."

"Imagine," said Jo to me that evening. "That took some guts."

My own first Caesarean after we got back was nothing like as dramatic, but it had its moments. One Sunday, a farmer walked up the drive and called, "Hodi?"

After the usual courtesies of the ritual greeting, I said, "What is your name, and where is your farm?"

"My name is Thambura. My farm is near Githongo."

"What is the problem?"

"My cow has been trying to give birth since early morning, but she is beaten. She is lying down and cannot get up. Can you help?"

"Yes, I can try to help, but it is Sunday, so I will have to bring my own vehicle." Thambura, Jo, who was off-duty, and I piled into our own Toyota Land Cruiser. The road resembled a mud bath. Forward progress was sometimes also sideways progress.

The previous weekend had been Easter, and Jo and I had worked one of the check points for the East African Safari Rally. The filthy, mud-spattered cars roared through Meru and out again onto the infamous stretch between Meru and Chuka, which was said to have more hairpin bends than it did miles.

We finally arrived at Thambura's eight-acre farm. A cross-bred Guernsey cow was lying exhausted in the middle of the paddock. A rope, low down around one foreleg, extended to a peg in the ground. One small foot could be seen protruding from her vulva, but there seemed to be an air of resignation about her. Her waters had burst about 7:30 that morning, and she had stopped trying to give birth about noon. It was now about 5:30 p.m. I knew I had to get on with things if we were to have any luck.

I stripped down, donned a protective plastic sleeve and examined things. The calf was tortuously twisted inside the uterus and it was dead. The only choices were to cut up the calf piece by piece and extract it, or to do a Caesarean section. With everything so dry inside her, the latter seemed to be the best option.

I got out the cooking pot that did duty as a sterilizing tray and turned to Thambura's wife. She seemed unfazed at being addressed by a half-dressed mzungu. "Please put water in this pot and get it boiling," I said. I then selected the necessary instruments from my kit and put them in the pot.

Next, some local anaesthetic around the proposed incision site for the cow. Using the broken edge of a safety razor blade clasped in a pair of forceps, I cleaned the hair off an area about 18 inches wide and two feet long on the cow's left side.

"Jo, please give this a scrub with the Betadine soap, while I scrub up myself. Then if you take a sterile 18-gauge needle and prick her skin we'll know if the local has taken effect."

"Have you got any alcohol for a final cleansing?" The alcohol was soon applied, both to the patient and my arms. Now came the easy part of any Caesarean section: first a long straight cut through the skin, then another through the underlying muscles, and the bulging uterus

appeared. Another careful cut through the uterus and the calf came to hand. With this little guy dead, I concentrated on putting everything back together again and trying to save the cow.

By now the evening was drawing in. Much worse, a massive head of clouds had loomed over the shoulder of Ithanguni, the hill above. Githongo gets about 50 inches of rain a year, and it felt as if about half of this fell in the next ten minutes. I was soaked within seconds. Everyone else retired to the house and watched through the cascade of water that fell over the eaves as a bedraggled, nearly naked European, wearing only black rubber boots and soaking wet underpants, went about his business.

My lack of hair ensured that there was no forelock to interfere with my vision, but the water cascading down my shiny forehead presented its own problems. Stitching the uterus with one long mattress suture, followed by another on top for insurance, was no problem. Even stitching the muscles was not too bad, but took a little longer as my body began to chill. Now I was in some trouble because the deluge was not only wet, it was cold. Numbing, in fact. By the time I started to stitch the skin, my hands were not really functioning. Stitching cow's skin is not as easy as the deeper layers. When one cannot feel one's instruments, things are even worse. As my teeth began to chatter, and my knees to knock, it occurred to me that I was never going to get this job done alone.

At this point Jo became aware of the situation and called, "Jerry, why don't you get into the warm and let me take over?"

I don't normally take sugar in my tea, but never has the mixture of tea, milk, and sugar, all boiled together for a prolonged period, tasted better. It took quite some time for me to begin to thaw. I stood outside and watched, a smoky-smelling blanket draped around my shoulders. By now the rain had stopped, but it was still quite cold.

Jo had never realized how incredibly tough it was to stitch through a third of an inch of skin. She finished, but not without some difficulty.

Thambura's wife produced another cup of her magic tea and a blanket for Jo, and we slithered off home down the hill once the exhausted cow had begun to show signs of recovery from her ordeal.

To be continued...