

# OLD AFRICA

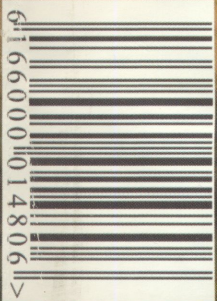
STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

## DC3 - QUEEN OF THE AFRICAN SKIES

Comets in Safari Rally | My Father Was a Woman

Hand Written Letters | Taveta Days

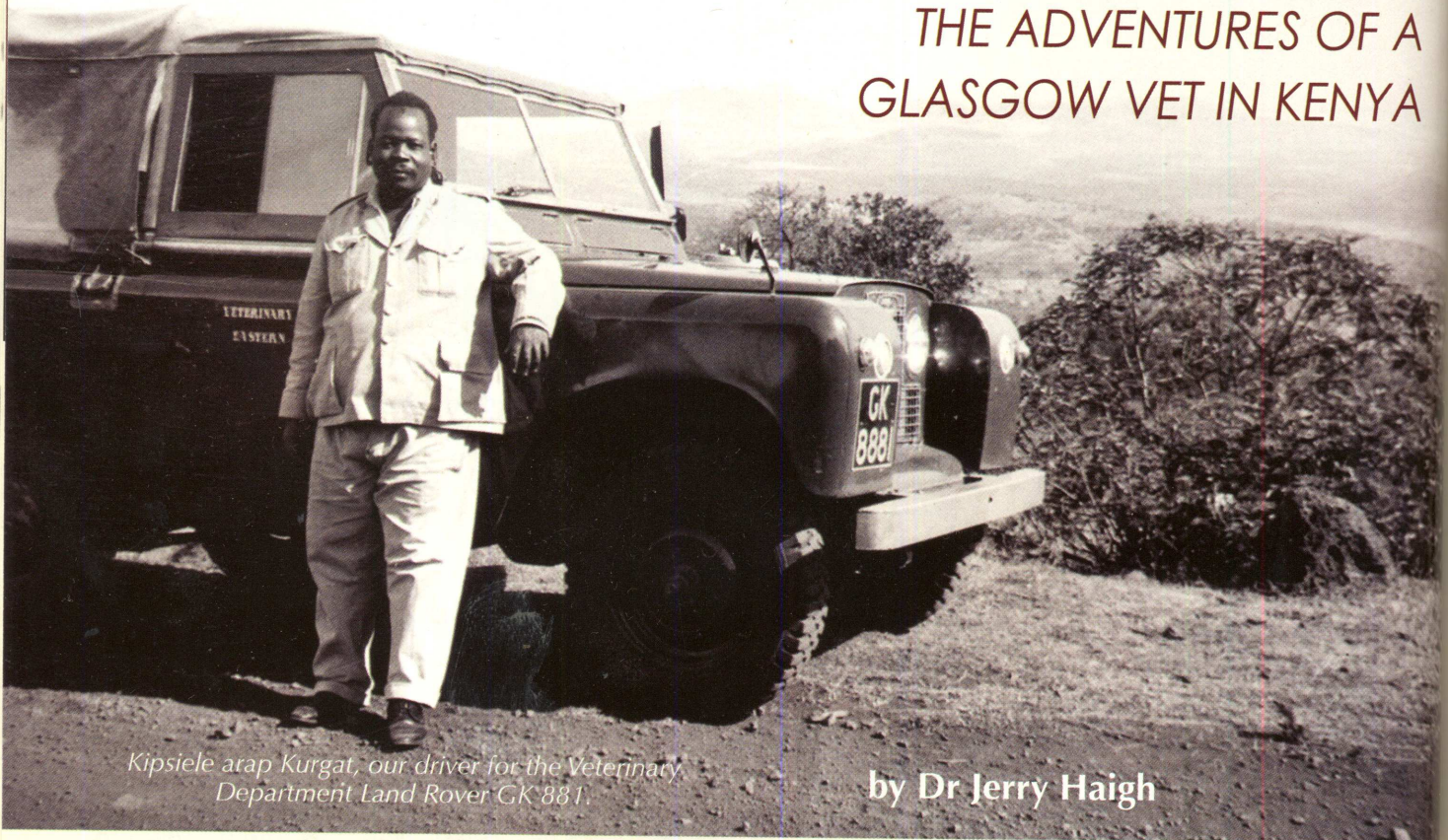
Page's Circus | Empires of the Monsoon



**WIN!**  
2 nights for 2 at  
**SATAO CAMP**  
PAGE 53

# WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 9

## THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA



*Kipsiele arap Kurgat, our driver for the Veterinary Department Land Rover GK 881.*

by Dr Jerry Haigh

*In part 8 of Old Africa's condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book *Wrestling with Rhinos*, the author married Dr Jo Riet in Meru, and went on to encounter some odd Caesarean sections. You can order the full book from the author's website [www.jerryhaigh.com](http://www.jerryhaigh.com) or from Amazon.*

**1969** A few weeks later, after the rains had finished, Thambura, returned to the office, once again asking for help with a cow that could not deliver her calf. Kipsiele drove me up with the farmer perched among the drug boxes in the back of the Land Rover, guiding us along the lanes and pathways. We were soon back at Githongo. The cow had only been trying to calve for about three hours. An examination told me that the legs were not positioned quite as they ought to be, and so with some contortions on my part, and the calf kicking and making my job much easier, it took only about 20 minutes to sort out the muddle and deliver a soggy brown heifer onto the ground. Thambura and his wife were delighted. A cup of tea was on the go, and, as the cow cleaned off her new baby, Kipsiele and I were each presented with a live chicken tied by the legs and thrown into the back of the vehicle, as

well as several ears of the now ripe corn and two enormous cabbages.

As we prepared to leave, Thambura came up to the passenger window. "Doctor," he said, "what is the name of the town in Ulaya where you come from?" Ulaya had originally meant England, where early explorers and administrators had originated, but had come to mean anywhere other than Kenya where a white person might come from.

"I was born in Nairobi, but I studied animal doctoring in Glasgow," I responded.

About a year later when I saw Thambura, he told me his heifer named Glasgow was doing really well and would soon be big enough to be taken to the AI station for breeding. A little corner of Scotland on the slopes of Mt Kenya!

Before Jo and I had married, Kipsiele had asked me to help him buy a shamba in Bomet, about 20 miles from Kericho, in the tea-growing country of Western Kenya where his Kipsigis tribe was based. I loaned him enough to make the purchase with a repayment schedule over three years.

On the day of my second visit to Thambura, Kipsiele's repayment obligations were past the half-way mark, and he updated me on the progress of his shamba.

"I have been paid tea money from my crop, and last month I bought another cow."

"How many cows do you have now?"

"Only three, but two of them are pregnant, and should calve soon."

"What breed?"

"Guernseys, like the ones at Marimba." I remembered what you said about these Friesians that are coming in here."

He referred to an unfortunate situation I had seen develop in Meru. When I had first arrived, the bulk of the dairy cattle had been Guernseys. Then an artificial insemination scheme had developed, funded by Swedish aid money. Swedish experts soon convinced the powers that be in the Veterinary Department that the high butter-fat, low-yielding Guernseys were passé. High-yielding, lower butter-fat black-and-white Friesians became the flavour of the day.

In all the excitement about higher milk yields someone forgot an essential truth. The Friesian, or Holstein as it is called in some parts of the world, is much larger than the Guernsey, and requires a lot more food to produce those extra volumes of milk. The average small holding in rural Kenya, only a few acres in size, is not geared to such an appetite.

I was in no position to do much about the change, but when asked, I would advise farmers to stick to what they knew, and stay away from the idea that "big is beautiful."

Later that day, as Jo and I enjoyed our usual cup of tea and discussed the day's events, Stanley the cook came silently on to the veranda.

"Bwana, can I have some gin from the bottle? Just a spoonful."

"What for?" I asked.

"You know that chicken you brought home today? I think it is very old, and will be difficult to cook well. I want to give it some gin and then kill it after a while, when it is relaxed."

I looked at Jo and smiled. "Don't know if it'll work," I said, "but it may be worth watching."

Half an hour later we watched Stanley give brief chase to an erratic chicken and then administer a *coup de grâce*. That evening we ate a fat-free chicken. It was not exactly tender, but at least it wasn't stringy, as chickens that have spent their lives running after whatever scraps they can scrounge tend to be. Whether that was due to Stanley's prescription, or his excellent touch in the kitchen, was an open question.

Soon after we got back from Europe, the

International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) approached Jo. Would she be interested in helping them in their family planning drive by providing IUD coils to women who did not want to conceive?

Jo was happy to try to help and she set up clinics every Wednesday afternoon. After a month, she told me, "At first it was very hard to get anyone interested, but after a while the nurses began to help, and we now have a steady stream of ladies. I do about ten every time."

But some time later, she said, "It's strange. These women are starting to come back to have the coils removed. It seems that they are quite happy to stop having babies for a while, and obtain some sort of control over their husbands, but then they decide to try and have a baby after all."

The IPPF team arrived from Nairobi the following week to see how Jo was doing, and we invited them over for dinner.

"I'm very interested to hear about your veterinary work," said their boss to me. "You say that you interact with farmers daily and meet them at cattle crushes. Do you think you could help us with the family planning scheme?"

I should have seen the trap, but didn't. "I can try. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I wondered if you could take contraceptives with you on your rounds and persuade the men to use them. It would greatly help our programme."

I foolishly agreed, and within a week two large cardboard boxes of condoms arrived by bus. The whole thing was a bad idea. I discussed it with Kipsiele, my sounding board for local matters, and he was extremely sceptical when I tried to describe the function and use of "a rubber sheath for preventing children" as I clumsily put it, in the absence of a Swahili word for condom in either my vocabulary or my dictionary.

I am no salesman. At any rate, not a single condom found its intended use.

One morning at Kibirichia, I did have cause to silently thank the IPPF for their generosity. At the communal cattle crush they brought me a cow whose udder was covered in blood.

"What happened?"

"She is on heat, and was trying to find a bull. She tried to jump the fence. Her teat caught on the barbed wire and she has cut it. It is very bad," said the owner.

I asked Bernard, the local animal health technician, for water, and washed off the udder. The action of the washing caused it to start bleeding again, and it was now plain to see a nasty three-inch cut down the length of right front teat.

"I shall have to stitch this up," I told the farmer and Bernard. "Bernard, please get some rope from the car, and get a fire going so we can boil my instruments. I'm going to give her an injection above the cut, so she won't feel the pain of the stitches and will stand still while I work."

Fifteen minutes later we were ready to proceed. "Tie the rope around her body just in front of the hip bones and the udder and pull it tight," I said, gesturing to her prominent pelvic bones. The cow arched her back as Bernard cinched down on the rope and tied it off. Theoretically, she could not kick now.

The stitching itself was a bit fiddly. I had to try to seal the delicate lining of the teat so that milk would not leak through. This required the use of a strand of fine catgut, a suture material that would dissolve after the cut had healed in a few days. The next task was to close the torn skin on the outside. The jagged rent caused by the barbed wire further complicated the matter. After what seemed like ages, as my aching back rebelled at the constant crouch halfway under the cow, I placed the last stitch.

"Now I'm going to put this little tap in the opening of her teat. Make sure that you pull off the cap twice a day and keep it clean. Put it back on when the milk has come out. Each day put in a new tube after you have given her some dawa to prevent mastitis."

I dug five tubes of mastitis ointment out of my medical box and handed them to Bernard.

"You'll have to visit this cow every day to give her one of these. She will also need an injection of penicillin every day for five days."

Then I had an inspiration. I pulled out a condom from the unused box beside the passenger seat, cut off the tip, and rolled the rubber up the teat so that it covered the wound. "Try to keep that on for a few hours. It will help keep the wound clean until you can get her home and into a clean boma and off the muddy road. Take it off tonight when you open the milk tube."

I gave the cow her first injection of penicillin and sorted out the matter of a fee with the farmer. The condoms languished in our house.

Jo and I had decided that it was time to try and start a family of our own, so they were of no direct use to us. Eventually I shipped them back to Nairobi.

It is not everyone that can say that they stored 10,000 condoms under their bed for several months. Or even 9,999.

By early 1970 Jo's enthusiasm for practicing medicine in a government hospital waned.

She became disillusioned about ill-discipline among some staff members, overcrowding and lack of cleanliness.

Jo was almost ready to become a lady of leisure rather than continue to put up with the daily aggravation, when an amazing opportunity arose. Father Andrew Botta, the priest at the Tigania Catholic mission about 20 miles away, infrequently dropped into the Meru club for a beer and perhaps a game of snooker.

Father Botta carried, in his slight frame and stoop, an incredible zest for life, and a virtually unquenchable energy. One day, during a chat with Father Botta, the subject of his mission health centre came up. He had been running the centre for several years with the help of



*Portrait of Kipsiele arap Kurgat,  
Veterinary Department driver in Meru.*

an excellent staff of nurses who had come out from Italy. Most, like the diminutive and feisty Sister Nunzia, who was in charge of the maternity ward, were fully trained. Others, like Terasina and Rosanna, were volunteers with basic training. There was also a group of staff from the local area.

"Do you need a doctor at the mission?" asked Jo.

"Of course, yes, but we have no money for salary so we could not afford."

"What about a volunteer?"

"Oh sure, that would be fantastic," said Father Botta, beginning to get the drift of the conversation.

"Let us think about it and see what can be done. Perhaps you could also think about it and see what could be done about transport."

We reached an agreement. Jo resigned from her government post, and Andrew found a battered old Renault 4L, with its peculiar push-me-pull-me gear stick in the middle of the dashboard. This had been on its second-last legs when passed to Jo. The rutted roads and daily grind soon removed this set of legs, and the old car began to give more trouble than was reasonable. As a replacement Father Botta provided a smart, almost new, Volkswagen Beetle.

Meanwhile, Jo and I were soon expecting our first child. Our daughter Karen arrived safe and sound in November. Soon afterwards, another important member of the household also joined us. Ester, an experience Nandi woman, came to be Karen's ayah (nanny).

As we sat on the veranda one Thursday evening a strange and somewhat dilapidated Land Rover drove into the yard. Out stepped a European who looked as if he had been around the block more than once. His heavily lined face and aquiline appearance gave evidence of plenty of exposure to the wind and sun.

"Good evening," he said in the cultured tones of an English gentleman. "Is this the home of Doctor Haigh?"

"Which Doctor Haigh?"

"Oh, I didn't realize that there were two. I'm looking for a medical doctor." His heavy eyebrows expressed themselves almost as independent bodies.

"Then you've come to the right place. This is my wife, Jo. She is the medic, I'm a vet. Can we offer you a drink? Come on in."

"Thank you. I'm Wilfred Thesiger. I'm

leaving tomorrow on a walk from Maralal via Lake Rudolph and up across the Chalbi desert, and I need some medical supplies for my staff in case of emergency."

This seemed to us to be rather a prodigious walk, but as we sat and chatted about the Northern Frontier District we realized that the projected trip was to be a rather tame affair compared to ones that he had done before. We had neither of us ever heard of Thesiger, so his stories of the empty quarter of Arabia and the Iraqi marshes fascinated us.

We later found copies of some of his books, and realized that he not only wrote with compelling style, but was an unusual explorer, and liked nothing better than to walk huge distances in tropical regions under extreme conditions accompanied by a small crew of locals and perhaps a few camels.

He agreed to stay for dinner and spend the night.

During dinner the conversation again returned to his need for medical supplies.

"What exactly do you need for this kind of trip?" asked Jo.

"I have a lot of the basic first aid stuff, so all I really need is some antibiotics and a dozen vials of morphine, in case anyone gets injured," he responded.

"Antibiotics I can let you have. I suggest some tetracycline and a couple of courses of ampicillin. But the morphine is a problem. I don't have any here, and we are running short in Tigania."

This was a bit of a white lie. As she said in bed that night, there was no way she was going to give morphine to a perfect stranger, whoever he said he was.

*To be continued...*