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OLD AFRICA

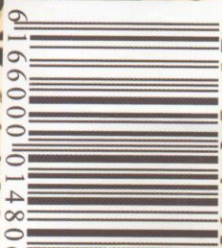
STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

PRINCE CHARLES & MZEE - 1977

Lamu Buried Gold | Mara River Ride

Elephant Shipwreck | Leven House

Tom Mboya | Kuldip Sondhi



WIN!
2 nights for 2 at
SATAO CAMP

WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 14

THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA

by Dr Jerry Haigh

My second contract as an employee of the government of Kenya, sponsored through the British Ministry of Overseas Development, was coming to an end. We had no wish to leave Kenya, and every desire to stay in the Mount Kenya area. I visited several of the large-scale farmers in the Timau area and put out the idea of a contractual agreement to allow me to start up in private practice, based in Nanyuki. George and Irralie Murray and Bob Wilson gave me every support, and so we decided to move. We planned to make the jump after our leave as we wanted to take Karen to Europe to meet her relatives, particularly her great-grandmothers. Being only five months old, she wouldn't remember anything of the trip, but it would be fun for the old ladies.

Before we left we were invited to supper by Lily, one of Jo's former midwife colleagues at the government hospital. She served us a meal of typical Meru traditional food – maize, *ugali*, cabbage and more."

We finished our superb meal and headed down the hill for the Mulika Coffee Hotel. About once a month they showed a movie with a meal in the main hall. This month it was a Bollywood potboiler, with subtitles for the non-Hindi speakers. We sat and watched the show and gradually began to feel uncomfortable. I surreptitiously undid the waistband on my trousers. A couple of minutes later Jo did the same to her skirt. We looked at each other and by mutual, unspoken signals we stood and headed out of the door.

"We shouldn't have had those second helpings," said Jo. "I feel so full. Let's go for a walk." We headed across the road and walked behind the veterinary office and across the fairways of the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth holes of the golf course. Our time as Meru residents was coming to an end. A new life in Nanyuki beckoned.

Our last social function in Meru was the farewell party thrown by the veterinary department staff. At three o'clock that afternoon, GK 881, now looking somewhat worn, rolled through the gap in the hedge

onto the lawn. Kipsiele stepped out and watched as Geoffrey and M'Ichoro removed bits and pieces from the back. First came two halves of a 44-gallon drum, each with metal angle iron welded to them as legs, and then a motley assortment of chairs. They poured sacks of charcoal in each drum, lit the charcoal and placed grills on top. The chairs were placed in a semi-circle around the braziers. Daniel took charge of the cooking. The meal was strictly for carnivores. *Nyama choma*, definitely *nyama* (meat) and very definitely *choma* (burnt). This time it was goat's meat. There was plenty of Tusker.

Short speeches were made, one or two becoming somewhat incoherent as time passed by. I received several ceremonial gifts. A fly whisk, symbol of strength, and an ornate walking stick, a symbol of respect. Kipsiele's wife Pauline had made an elaborately decorated belt for me and a woven bag for Jo. Kipsiele himself had found a traditional Kipsigis knife and had made a sheath of red-stained leather for it.

Before wrapping up my final report after four years and a few months of service, I had made several proposals for promotions among my staff, including a strong recommendation that Kipsiele be promoted to Driver Grade I.

Twenty-eight years later we tracked down Kipsiele on his farm in Bomet. He was an old man by then, but we had a wonderful visit. He had been duly promoted and had ended up as the senior driver in the provincial headquarters at Nakuru before retiring. He was now living on the seven-acre farm that he had purchased with money we'd loaned him. He had a thriving tea-growing operation. We went for a slow walk on the farm. He showed us his few cattle. Of his seven children, two were university graduates, two were teachers, one an accountant, one had been an army sergeant, and he had high hopes for the last-born girl. Less than three months after we returned to Canada, in March of 1998, Richard, his eldest son, sent us an e-mail telling us our friend Kipsiele had passed away. We had found him just in time.

Kenya to start our private practice in Nanyuki as our base. We had many friends in the area, having been involved in the rugby scene for several years. Nanyuki was the economic centre of numerous large-scale farms. The first European farmer in the district had arrived in 1910, with 13 chickens and four dogs, but from that meagre start the area had become a thriving agricultural community. There were many high-quality beef animals, with famous breeds such as Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, Galloway, South Devon, Charolais, Boran, and even Simmental. The dairy mix was also varied, with Channel Island breeds, Ayrshire, and Friesian. To round out the cattle mix there were dual-purpose breeds such as Brown Swiss and Sahiwal. There were several flocks of sheep numbering in the thousands, and of course more than enough accompanying horses and household pets to keep a veterinary practice on the go. Many more of Jo's patients would be of European extraction, and she could expect a steady caseload at her new office in the Cottage Hospital.

Before leaving Meru we had searched in Nanyuki for a house to rent. Anne Allen, an acquaintance from rugby days, said, "I hear you're looking for somewhere to rent. There's a place down Lunatic Lane, right opposite me. It belongs to a Nairobi couple. I have a key to get in. Why don't you have a look?" We headed down this oddly named murram road.

"Anne, why is it called Lunatic Lane? Is there a dark story behind it?"

"There are several stories, but the one that I hear most often stems from the early days. The road was developed in the mid-1930s because it lies on the ridge between the Nanyuki and Liki rivers. The land was divided into ten-acre plots and used for weekend fishing cottages or for retired people. An old couple bought one of the plots and moved in. Pretty soon, drama developed. About twice a week the wife used to appear at the club and start screaming, 'Get that lunatic away from me! Help me! Help me!' Invariably she would very soon be followed by her husband, usually brandishing a kitchen knife or an axe."

We had agreed to rent the house. After the moving lorry departed, we sat on some boxes, trying to remember which crate held our sheets and blankets. Soon the first of our new neighbours arrived at the door. She was a tiny,

holding an old-fashioned hearing aid box in front of her, with its twisted cord snaking up under her hair, accompanied by a pack of what seemed to be about 15 miniature Yorkshire terriers.

Muffin, our miniature long-haired dachshund, was more than pleased to meet a set of individuals not only of his own species, but of his own size. The pack turned into a group of no more than six, most of them with little ribbons on their top knots to keep the hair out of their eyes. Tail, ears, and head erect, Muffin checked out his new acquaintances.

"Good evening, my dears," she boomed loudly, in the manner of the very deaf. "I'm Enid Pipe, from just up the road. (Down, Bertie.) I thought it must be you. I had heard from Anne Allen that you were coming, and when I saw the lorry I thought I'd come down and say hello. (Oh don't mind Jenny, she's just inquisitive.) Anyway, you must come round and have a drink and some supper. What about tomorrow night? I do hope you've got some distemper vaccine, as these characters need their injections."

I shook my head and pointed at the shambles around us.

"No vaccine? Oh well, I'm sure you'll get some in, dear. Let me know right away when you do. I'll let you get on with the unpacking. Tomorrow night at seven. Good night. Come on, dogs. Bertie! Jenny! Freddie!" She marched off with a determined stride and disappeared round the corner of the house.

Jo soon got her practice going at the Nanyuki Cottage Hospital. At that time it had ten private rooms, a six-bed maternity ward, a surgical suite, a broken-down X-ray machine that looked as if it had been discarded by someone soon after Noah had landed, and not much else except a fabulous view of Mount Kenya through the podo trees that lined the river bank. The matron explained that the local government hospital had a good laboratory, but there was no X-ray unit in town.

Late one afternoon, Jo said to me, "Can you come up and look at the X-ray unit with me after supper?"

I agreed. "Speaking of supper, I'll go see how Njoroge is getting on." Njoroge, a Kikuyu from Karatina, had arrived at the door the morning after we had moved into the cottage, looking for work. He had a letter from a former

employer that stated that Njoroge had been employed as a cook cum house servant and his employment ceased when his employer left the country.

Needing a cook, and seeing no other candidates, we took him on. He did a good job keeping the house clean, but his knowledge of cooking lay somewhere between the rudimentary and the non-existent. Neither Jo nor I knew much of cooking and we owned not a single recipe book, so something had to be done. Perhaps we could teach him ourselves, step by step. For this evening we had set Njoroge to making mashed potatoes, peas, and fillet steak.

Jo set off to see one more patient, while I had a look in the kitchen. Seeing that the potatoes were on the boil, and the peas shelled, I decided nothing much could go wrong for an hour or so, and headed for the river to fish. My rod was already set up and hanging on hooks in the passageway. With net in hand and rod over my shoulder, I stepped out through the gate at the bottom of the garden and set off down the path. Muffin and Njugu, the Staffordshire bull terrier we had inherited from departing residents, came along. Both immediately disappeared into the bushes beside the path.

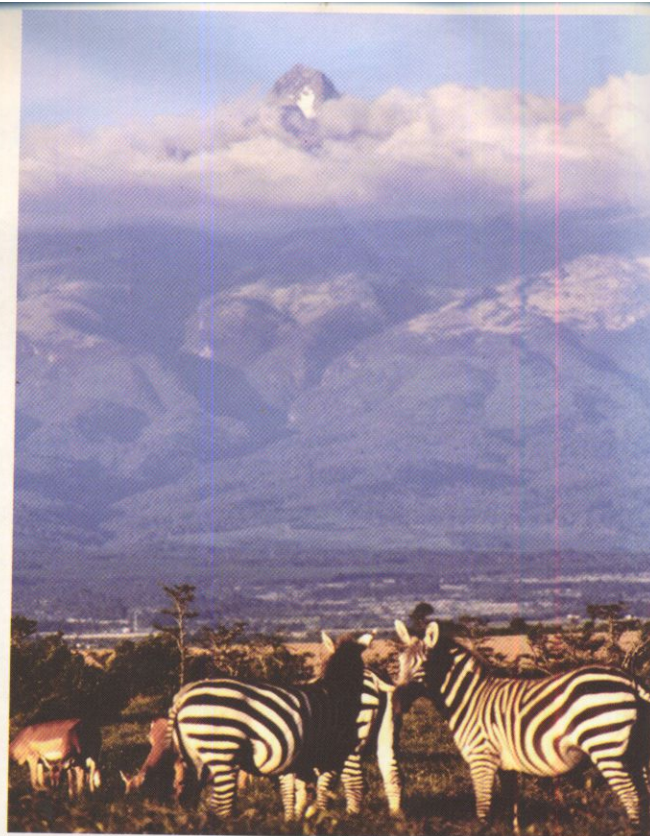
The fish were not biting, but the rushing water, the shade cast by the big podo trees with their spiky waxed leaves and rough bark, and the cooing of the doves made for a relaxing scene. Muffin, his hair now a mass of burrs, and the plume of his tail a complete tangle, came to the water's edge. We headed home to check the progress of supper.

The potatoes and peas were fine. I cooked the steaks myself on the old wood stove, showing Njoroge how to fry the meat in a very hot pan with a little butter.

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Tomorrow, when you cook our boiled eggs, remember that I like mine done for three-and-half minutes, while memsahib likes hers hard, at least five minutes boiling." He seemed to understand.

After supper we set off up the road to look at the ancient X-ray machine. The reason it was not working seemed to be rather simple - it had no plug, just loose wires. Five minutes later I announced to Jo that we seemed to have power. "The warning light comes on when I plug it in and we may be able to do something," I said. For the next few days, we puzzled over how to



Mt Kenya looks down over Ol Pejeta Ranch near Nanyuki. (Photo by Jerry Haigh)

test the X-ray machine. We didn't dare use the thing on human patients until we knew what settings to dial in, because of the danger of high exposure.

Then luck intervened. One of Jo's early patients was Sue Sewell, whose husband Bob was an undermanager at Ol Pejeta ranch. Sue had been a radiology technician before moving with Bob to the Nanyuki area, and she had a good guide book containing lots of information about focal lengths, time for exposure, development techniques, and the like.

"Could you come and help me set up this machine?" asked Jo.

"Of course," said Sue enthusiastically. "I'll send the book in with the driver tomorrow so that you can get everything you need and have some idea how to start."

We ordered films and new chemicals, which arrived two days later from Nairobi. We had decided to use our dog Njugu as our test specimen, as she was a spayed bitch, so anything we did in the way of X-rays was not going to damage her reproductive potential.

With a long-acting anaesthetic in her system, I manipulated her on the table and made a series of exposures based upon the advice in Sue's book. The hospital only had one lead apron, so I banned Jo from the area and carefully donned

both the apron and the lead gloves. I recorded the voltage, the milliamps, the number of seconds shown on the spring-loaded dial, and the thickness and kind of tissue that I was shooting through, as bones need quite different settings than stomachs. Using the chemicals in the darkroom was simply a matter of following the excellent directions in the book. After two hours and a dozen X-rays, I was able to make up a chart that might work for humans, or even horses.

Njoroge made little, if any, progress as a cook. The morning after the steak lesson, I found him boiling two pans of water on the stove. "What are those for?" I asked.

"One is for your egg, the other for the memsahib's." I suppose it seemed logical to him. At that moment I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. A cat groggily staggered out of the open front door of the cottage. Realizing that it could only be my patient that had come in for surgery the previous afternoon, I absolutely had to catch it. I grabbed my fishing net. I checked the cages and confirmed that somehow the door of the cat's was not bolted. Half an hour later, after crawling about

flower beds and thorn bushes, I had succeeded in getting the cat safely back into her kennel.

When Njoroge finally parted company with us, neither he nor we were particularly unhappy about it. He returned to Karatina, and we put out the word for a new cook. Eventually we took on Abuyekah, a slim, slightly balding Abaluhya from Kenya's Western Province, who proved to be a talented chef with a fine sense of humour. He was able, with virtually no notice, to produce a hot breakfast - scrambled eggs, sausages, toast, coffee, the whole bit - for as many as eight or ten of the Mt Kenya rugby team, whom he would find dosed down all over the cottage on a Sunday morning after a game. When I appeared one evening with some doves, he instructed me to go and buy cream and some spices so that he could make a "doves braised in cream sauce" dinner the following evening. It was simply sublime.

To be continued...