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WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 5

THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA

by Dr Jerry Haigh

In part 4 of Old Africa's condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book Wrestling with Rhinos, the author treated a horse that jumped on top of a small Fiat car and then completed his internship at the Faculty of Veterinary Science in Kabete. You can order the full book from the author's website www.jerryhaigh.com or from amazon.com

1967 After six months in England and Scotland, I returned to Kenya with a two-year contract with the British Ministry of Overseas Development to work in the government veterinary service. Paul Sayer, my flatmate from internship days, arranged for me to stay with him in Kabete until I received my posting.

I purchased a second-hand Peugeot 403 from Joginder Singh, who had recently won the East African Safari in a second-hand Volvo. Dr Murithi, the Director of Veterinary Services, soon assigned me to Meru as a District Veterinary Officer (commonly known as DVO). All I knew about Meru was that it was about 50 miles from Nanyuki on the northeastern slopes of Mount Kenya.

I borrowed a map from Paul and decided to try the route via Embu. The next morning, armed with nothing more in the way of veterinary equipment than a few instruments and a stethoscope, I set off for what was to be my home for over four years.

I passed Thika with its huge coffee and pineapple plantations. The red-dirt road meant a dust-cloud enveloped me every time a car passed the other way. After Embu the road turned to sand and gravel, dry and dusty but fairly wide. Having learned from others the previous year, I instinctively put my hand on the windshield each time an approaching car came past. This was supposed to prevent the glass from shattering if hit by a flying stone. I had opted to take the low road, as the alternative through Chuka had a fearsome reputation for its hundreds of hairpin bends.

I saw a few herds of gaunt humped cattle, and once a group of zebra exploded in a cloud of dust as I surprised them round a bend There was little traffic, but after about an hour I was almost pushed off the road by a heavily overloaded Land Rover driving at breakneck speed, bearing nothing but bundles of green leaves. After passing the yellow-and-black sign marking the equator, I arrived in Meru at about tea-time. From the bridge over the Kazita River I saw the sign to my hotel. The Ministry had booked me in for a ten-day stay at the Pig and Whistle.

I pulled up alongside a long wooden bungalow with its pale brown mabati (corrugated iron) roof, the rails on the veranda needing a new coat of white paint. Stiff from the three-and-a-half-hour drive, I climbed the rather rickety steps towards a sign that said Reception. As I reached the top step, a dapper Asian man sat up in his armchair and said, "Good afternoon. How may I be helping?"
"Hello. I hope you have a room for me. My name is Jerry Haigh. I'm the new District Veterinary Officer."

"Oh yes indeed. I'm Sadru Din. Call me Sadru. We thought you would be here in the morning. You are most welcome. Your room is over there, cabin number six." He pointed to a dark-coloured cabin across a flower bed full of roses in several colours and garish yellow and red canna lilies. "Water is hot if you are needing a shower."

The Pig and Whistle had been a well-known Kenya watering spot before and during the war years, but it had fallen on hard times during the Mau Mau emergency years in the 1950s. Sadru had bought it and had refurbished the interior, leaving the character of the buildings intact. "You have picked a good day to arrive," said Sadru at tea-time. "Tonight is a club night. After tennis there will be many people coming and you can meet them."

After I showered, Sadru and I headed about 300 yards up the hill and turned into a gravel lot where several cars were parked. It was dusk. Four hardy souls were still hitting the ball about on the nearer of the two red murram tennis courts, and I could hear the muffled cracks of a squash ball hitting a wall,

interspersed with the squeak of shoes. There were about 20 people in the main room, which had a bar in the corner, and a snooker table on the left. Sadru demanded a membership form for me from the barman and proceeded to fill it out after ordering a round of Tuskers. He introduced me to a slim gangly Englishman named Tim Roberts, and a shorter, dark-haired man named Jim Black.

"Tim is a livestock officer. He is staying at the Mulika Coffee Hotel until he finds accommodation. Jim is with the forestry department; he lives in the Forestry Officer's house."

"Good to meet you both. I'm the new veterinary officer."

"Which road did you take?" asked Tim.

"I took the bottom road out of Embu. I was nearly pushed off the road by a Land Rover going full tilt near a place called Mitungu. It had a huge pile of green leaves in the back — they looked like banana leaves."

"Oh, that's almost certainly a truck load of mira'a heading for Nairobi. They wrap the bundles of leaf in banana leaves for transportation."

"Mira'a, what's that?" I asked.

"It's a tree that grows on the north slopes of the Nyambeni hills," he said. "It's also called quatt in some countries. The freshly cut twigs, with their few leaves, are chewed by people all over the Middle East, Ethiopia, and Somalia, as a stimulant. The leaves are apparently no good unless fresh, and so twice a week a mass of vehicles leave Meru for Nairobi. The drivers take no account of other traffic, or even pedestrians. The airport is their sole goal."

Tim's words proved prophetic. Four years later a mira'a driver smashed into the back of his Land Rover at high speed. Tim ended up in Meru hospital.

After a couple of beers I headed down the hill for some supper. There was another white man staying at hotel, but he only nodded as I walked into the dining room.

Later Sadru told me he was an Austrian count named Frans-Joseph Windisch-Grätz, who had a house in Langata and who had been coming to Meru every year for several years.

"He comes up just after Christmas to shoot the green pigeons that fly every morning and evening to and from their roosting sites in the wild olives trees lower down the slopes. He stands in the bushes at the roadside and shoots them as they fly over. The lady with him is his sister-in-law." Sadru managed to put the 'sisterin-law' in discreet quotations, with a slight raising of his eyebrows.

I chatted with the couple a few evenings later as we drank an after-dinner coffee in the lounge. "It is most annoying," said Windisch-Grätz. "One of my Purdeys has developed a fault, so I will have to use the Holland and Hollands for the next few days. The season is almost over so it will not be a great hardship."

Somewhat akin to exchanging the Rolls Royce for the Daimler, I thought to myself.

At our next encounter he said, "This year I have only shot 6,001 pigeons."

Trying to hide my surprise, I asked, "How do you know the total so exactly?"

"Oh, I employ several small boys to pick up each bird and put it in a drum. Then I count the birds to see that they have picked them all up. I know what I have killed because I count them as I shoot."

On the road to Chuka near Meru, a woman brings home the thatch.

"Are they any good to eat?" I asked.

"I do not know, I have never tried one," he said in his slightly stilted English.

Later I heard that he had been discovered some years prior somewhere in the Northern Frontier District by George Adamson, then game warden at Isiolo, with a huge pile of sand grouse, which he had killed in a one-hour period as they flighted into the water holes in a lugga (a stream bed, normally dry most of the time). George had successfully brought charges of overhunting against him, and a limit of 25 sand grouse had then been instituted. Windisch-Grätz (Windy-scratch as we called him) used to go directly from Meru to Arusha in Tanzania for the sole purpose of shooting sand grouse there. Perhaps they did not have a limit.

Over 30 years later I saw a photo of him, standing in a typical gun-in-hand pose, at the entrance to three rooms dedicated to his collection of African big game trophies in a Hungarian castle. Apart from the considerable variety of species involved, I was struck by the total head count. I had never met or heard of a hunter who seemed to see shooting simply as a numbers game.

My first client turned up before I even had a chance to meet my new staff. A short, slightly tubby, very efficient laboratory technician, whose name I soon found out was Vitalis Kirimania, knocked and stepped into my office.

"Excuse me sir, but this farmer, Mr Ntima, hasa sick cow."

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"My cow gave birth yesterday and then fell down after the calf had sucked. I think she wants to die. Can you come and see?"

Vitalis told me that there were a variety of drugs available in the store and that Kipsiele, the official driver, was free to take me to the farm. We loaded equipment into the Land Rover with its Government of Kenya plates, GK 881 and Kipsiele, a short, rotund man, wearing a beige uniform, climbed up behind the wheel. The farmer piled into the back among the equipment.

The farm was no great distance from the office. The history I had obtained from the farmer had given me a strong inkling as to what might be wrong. Once I saw that the cow was a Guernsey, I felt sure the diagnosis was probably a condition called milk fever. This occurs when the demands of producing milk

The village of Kirua seen from above, a patchwork of cultivated plots.

suddenly deprive the blood of its calcium. Without calcium the muscles cannot work, and the nervous system shuts down. The Channel Island breeds are particularly susceptible. As I examined the cow, I became convinced. Her ears, lower legs, and feet were quite cold. The problem was the length of time that the cow had been down. Milk fever is a genuine emergency requiring treatment within an hour or two. This cow had calved the previous day and had been down since early afternoon. The elapsed time now was about 20 hours. Her pulse was exceedingly slow, and her eyes unresponsive to touch.

I decided to try the standard treatment: a calcium injection. Normally this injection would be given slowly, directly into the jugular vein, and the cow could be expected to be up and about very quickly. However, this was far from a normal case. The risks of a sudden return towards normal calcium levels in the blood were considerable. A slow rise would make more sense.

"I'm going to give the cow two injections.

The first one will go under the skin, and we'll see what happens. Then I'll give another one into her neck if she needs it," I told the farmer.

The first injection took about 15 minutes, and a grapefruit-sized bulge appeared under the skin behind her shoulder. The cow showed no visible response. However, her pulse rate increased very slightly. The second bottle went into the vein, also very slowly. After this I turned my attention back to her shoulder, where the fluid from the first injection had not completely disappeared. To get rid of the lump I used the empty bottle as a rolling pin. Calcium salts sting rather sharply. The pain that I was inflicting in her side caused her to kick. With a couple of thrashes she rolled onto her belly, took one look at me, and decided that

enough was enough. Up she got, starting to graze almost at once.

It would be hard to gauge who was more delighted, the farmer for this apparent miracle, or the newly arrived veterinary officer. What luck to have such a case as a first challenge in a new district!

Kibirichia, Githongo, Nkubu, Kithirune, Kirua, Kaaga, Michimukuru, Karienne. The names, spoken in the musical tones of Kimeru, the local language, trip from the tongue like tinkling bells. At first, they meant no more to me than words on the large-scale district map, but soon they began to develop real identities.

I travelled around the district almost every day for medical emergencies, routine visits and farmer's barazas (meetings). The first baraza I attended took place in the village of Kirua. Kipsiele and I travelled up the bumpy road together in GK 881. Daniel Gatururu, the animal health technician for the area, had told us to be there at ten o'clock.

"Where are all the people?" I asked him in Swahili as he emerged from the coffee shop in the middle of a row of the stores that stood around three sides of the market square. I had forgotten about the difference between "real" time and "African" time.

"They're late. Come for some tea." We entered the café. A young man appeared and, in Kimeru, Gatururu ordered chai and samosas, the delicious spiced pastry of Indian origin.

"When will people come?" I asked Gatururu. "What about the chief?"

"Soon," he replied.

I was not amused, but there was little I could do. Half an hour later, Gatururu greeted a small group of men as they approached the restaurant. "Bwana, this is Chief John of Kirua location and he says that we can start the meeting."

After introductions, we walked over to a row of chairs that had been set out on the grass and sat down, the chief in the middle, me on his immediate right. There were already about 60 people sitting facing the chairs, and the milling group in the square soon moved over and joined us. Gatururu acted as master of ceremonies and also interpreter.

At first things were slow, as we explained the artificial breeding program that was being extended to the area and the farmers haggled over the most convenient time for the service to be carried out.

"The government is going to send motorcycles to the crushes to service our cows," said a tall man who stood about halfway back in the crowd. "This is good, but how will we know that we have not missed them when we bring our cattle? Surely we should be allowed to keep a bull, so that if we miss the man at the crush we can still be sure that our cattle get pregnant."

Choosing to ignore the fact that the motorcycles would not actually be doing the inseminations, I told the tall man, "We will instruct the" — I struggled to find a Swahili word for "inseminator," but failed — "the man who serves the cows that he will have to be at each crush until a certain time. He will not leave until that time has been reached."

I looked around the crowd and went on, "The matter of the bulls is a matter of the County Council laws. It is illegal to have a bull with his testicles present if he is over six months of age in areas where there are grade cattle. This ensures that only good semen will be used. Think how you would feel if you were taking your cow that wants a bull to the crush and a shenzi bull jumped her. You would be very cross." Shenzi is a most useful word which means "of low quality," and can be applied to almost anything.

Gatururu asked if anyone had specific questions for the new daktari. A woman in the front row caused a slow chuckle in the crowd as she asked about a problem cow. Gatururu translated the Kimeru for me.

"She has a cow that keeps running away. It breaks her fence. She has tried improving the fence around her shamba (small farm). She has even made a wooden yoke around the animal's neck. Still it gets out almost daily and eats the vegetables in her neighbours' farms. What should she do?"

As the question was rendered sentence by sentence into Kimeru, I had the chance to do some thinking. There didn't seem to be any obvious magic solution.

"Tell her to buy a long rope," I began.

Gatururu translated this, and before I could go any further, the chuckle in the crowd turned into a happy laugh, led by the questioner.

Sometimes the slow pace of translation can be a real boon. I was reminded of my response on many later occasions when I visited the area.

To be continued…