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OLD AFRICA

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WIN!
2 nights for 2 at
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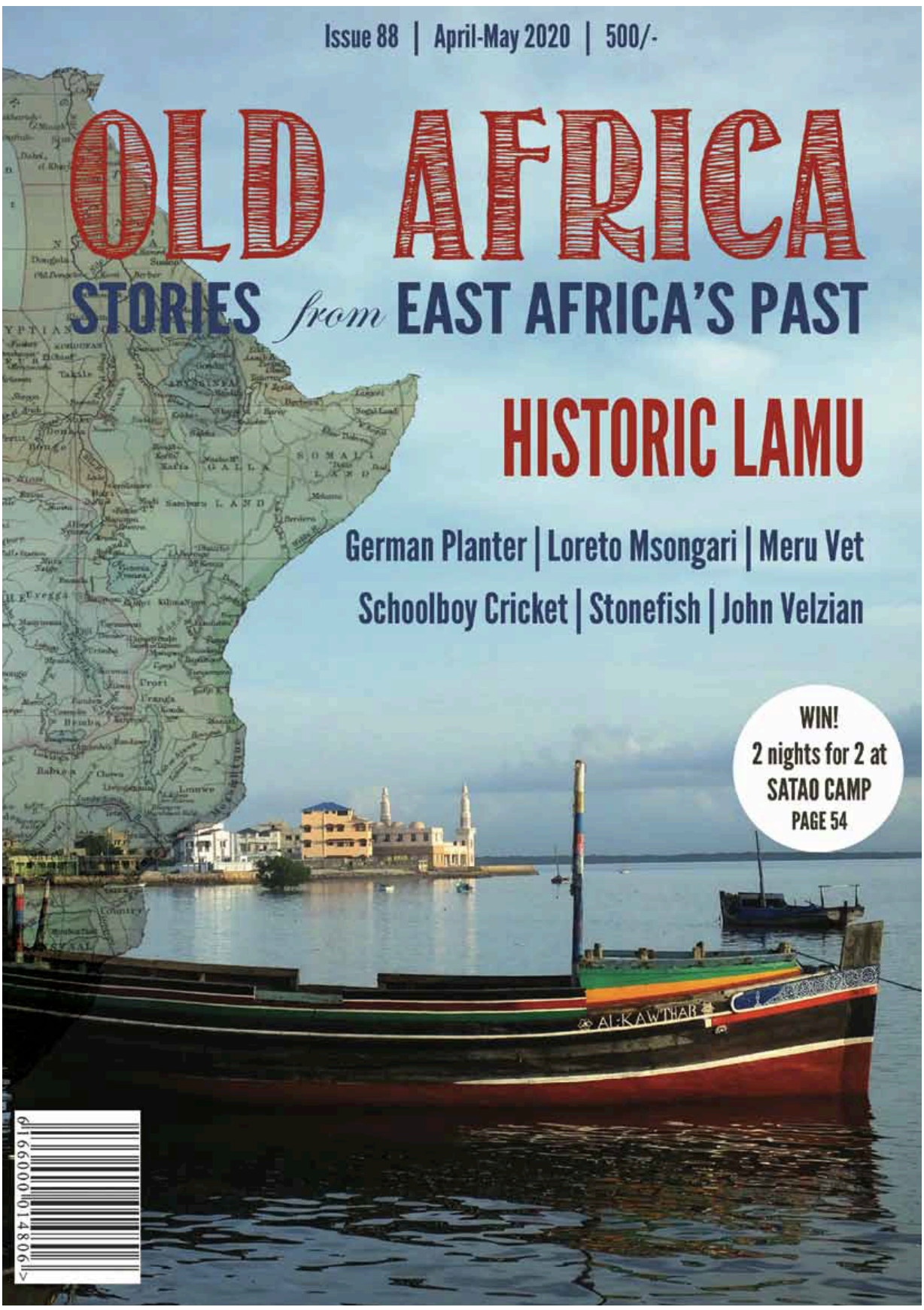

Wrestling With Rhinos Part 6

The Adventures of a Glasgow vet in Kenya

by Dr Jerry Haigh

In part 5 of Old Africa's condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book Wrestling with Rhinos, the author came back to Kenya after his internship to start as a District Veterinary Officer in Meru. You can order the full book from the author's website www.jerryhaigh.com or from amazon.com

Within a week the District Commissioner informed me that there was no house available for me unless I was willing to share accommodation.

At the club, over a game of snooker, Tim and I agreed to double up. We moved into an old dark-stained, tin-roofed wooden house with an enormous avocado-pear tree towering over it, which seemed to produce fruit almost nonstop.

A slight, brown-skinned African bearing a somewhat sweat-stained letter appeared like a wraith at the gate within a day of our arrival.

The letter stated that Stanley Thambura had worked as the writer's houseboy for three years and we took him on. He proved well able to deal with the needs of a couple of bachelors.

One evening a stranger walked into the garden. "Good evening. Would either of you be Jerry Haigh at all?" His accent identified him as an Irishman. He was slim, with greying hair, no more than about five foot eight inches tall, and his metal-rimmed glasses framed a pair of piercing pale blue eyes.

"You must be Dr O'Callaghan the new medical officer. Sadru told me about you. Good evening."

"Call me Fin, short for Finbar. When might you be free to do a little fishing? I understand you know the local spots."

"I'm free most evenings about five o'clock after work. Would tomorrow suit you?"

" Tomorrow would be fine, but I don't usually get away from the hospital until after five-thirty. Is that still feasible?"

" Yes, I don't see why not. I'll wait for you here."

We headed up the road to a spot on a government farm called Marimba where the river had been dammed and some administrator had stocked trout. I had caught a four-pound rainbow there. As the light disappeared behind the rounded hill above the farm, the water looked as if it was beginning to boil. There seemed to be six fish rising at any one moment and we caught some rainbow trout. When we got back to town, Fin showed me a new method of examining the food items of our quarry. "You cut open the stomach and put the contents in a glass of water. Then pour the water off very carefully and put the last drops together with the contents on to a piece of blotting paper." Fin's wife Lorna didn't seem to mind. Fin and I had many successful trips to the dams over the next couple of years.

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I walked into the office early, and two farmers were there ahead of me waiting under the pepper tree that threw its shade over the building.

"Good morning Doctor. The news is good. But my pig is sick," said the shorter of the two.

"What sickness?" I asked.

"She is not eating, and her skin is red."

"We'll come and see her." Turning to the other man I asked, "What is your problem?"

"I gave my cow her medicine for bad milk this morning and she became sick straightaway. She is a bit better now, but I saw my neighbour Frederick" — he gestured to the first man with his chin — "coming with a taxi and we decided to come together."

The second farmer was named Erasto Twerandu.

We piled into the Land Rover about half an hour later, and after a bumpy 40-minute ride, stood looking over the stall at a large, unhappy pig. Red splotches about the size of a playing card were scattered all over its body, and the tips of its ears were bright red. The feed in its trough had not been touched. I climbed into the pen after Frederick assured me it was a quiet animal. The temperature was elevated, and the skin hot to the touch. It looked like a classic case of diamond disease, or by its Sunday name, erysipelas.

"I'm going to give this pig an injection, and I'll leave dawa with you for more injections for

the next four days. Even if the pig gets better quickly, every injection must be given. Tell Bernard (the animal health technician for the area) that I've said this, so that he can come each day and give the injections."

We left Frederick and his family with a sackful of carrots, cabbage and potatoes, which he insisted we accept. We proceeded up a narrow track to the next farm. Erasto pointed out the black-and-brown Jersey cross that had been the problem early that morning.

"Her milk went bad last year, and I went to the office and got some of this dawa," he said, showing me a used tube of intramammary penicillin. Dawa is an all-important word in Swahili, meaning medicine. "She got better, but when she gave birth this year her milk was bad again. I got the same dawa from Vitalis and gave it to her yesterday. Almost at once she started to breathe very fast and all her hair stood up on end. What should I do? The milk is still bad." The solution seemed simple. I exchanged his remaining tubes of mastitis ointment for a different type.

We were only about five miles from Marania, a large-scale farm on the way to Nanyuki. At a recent rugby practice I'd met Frank Douglas manager of Marania, and he had generously invited me to drop by. Frank was standing in the driveway next to another veterinary department vehicle. A short, red-haired man dressed in khaki shorts and a golf shirt stepped out.

Frank introduced him as Kieran Kane, the District Veterinary Officer for Nanyuki district, who was there to see a sick bull. Frank invited us to join them for lunch. Afterwards, we met Frank's employers, George and Irralie Murray. Several large dogs ran up to greet us. One had a savage scar from the eye backwards over the skull. I stroked it, asking her, as one foolishly does, "Hello my girl, what happened to you?"

We were assigned an old dark-stained, tin-roofed wooden house, prosaically named HG2 (presumably it was the second government house built in the compound); HG2 was painted on a board near the gate.

"Oh," responded George, "that's Carrah. She was stupid enough to run under the whirring prop of my plane about two months ago, and it caught her. Knocked her cold. I bundled her into the back of the pick-up, got Irralie to radio to Nanyuki, and took her to Kieran."

Kieran picked up the tale. "She arrived in my office still unconscious. I clipped back the hair, cleaned out the bone chips and discovered that the dura - the delicate membrane surrounding the brain - had not been damaged. The right eye was utterly destroyed. I cleaned up the skin

edges, put some antibiotic into the wound, and stitched it back together as best as I could." "She's never looked back," said Irralie, "but she's no smarter around machinery."

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One morning in Meru while walking to the municipal offices to settle our water bill, I ran into Fin's wife Lorna. With her was an attractive brunette, her hair in a ponytail. "Good morning Jerry," said Lorna. "I'd like you to meet Joanne van de Riet. She's just arrived as a new medical officer to help Fin and Subash at the hospital. Jo, this is Jerry, the district veterinary officer."

"Welcome to Meru. Will we see you at the club this evening? If you play tennis, we have a mix-in. One set, first to six games, and then change partners."

"That would be fun. What time?" she asked.

"About five."

"Why don't you come and have a bite to eat with us after tennis?" said Lorna, perhaps sensing a spark. "Then you can have a bit more of a chat."

At dinner, for which she had changed into a smart tartan dress and put her hair up in a French roll, accentuating her slim features, I learned more of Jo's history. "I was born in Poona (now Pune), India. My parents are Dutch. My dad went out to India in 1935 with Philips. I did all my high schooling in India, and went to medical college at Vellore Christian Medical College. After that I went to Holland for a year and began to study in paediatrics, and then had a year in Zambia as a rotating intern."

"How did you get to Kenya?" I asked.

"Just stopped in at Nairobi, as I had been told it was worth a visit. Then I took a tour bus organized by the hotelier."

When she ran out of money, she walked into the Ministry of Health and within a week she was squeezed into a Land Rover, on her way to Meru to join Fin at the district hospital.

Jo was granted a house but she had no crockery or cooking pots. A government clerk loaned her the bare necessities from stores - a battered collection of plastic and cheap china bits and pieces of varying sizes and a couple of dented aluminium saucepans.

Jo and I often met at the weekly Tuesday night tennis mix-ins, and at the post office, and other places around town. She would greet me from the front garden of her house as we putted out on the fourth green. She also made trips to Marimba and even tried her hand with the fly rod.

One evening, at dinner in her house, I noticed that she had acquired a new floral water jug. "Funny," I said, picking it up and turning it to get a better look, "did you get that water jug here in town? We've got one just like it."

"I don't know, the cook just put it on the table," she replied.

A couple of nights later there was a matching set of china plates and bowls on the table that resembled those in my house. The occasion was a local celebration of the Dutch Queen's official birthday, so other Hollanders were present and I had been made an honorary Dutchman for the evening. Henk Faberij de Jonge, a trim dark-haired volunteer, turned one of the dishes over and said, "Jerry, these plates are like yours. I wonder from where they are coming." As Juma, Jo's cook, came in with the main course I asked him, in Swahili, about the new bits and pieces.

"Oh bwana, it's easy. I went to your cook and borrowed them when I heard that the memsahib had invited you to dinner. They are much smarter than the old shenzi green ones that she got from that Hindi clerk. I knew you

Chicken vaccination, one of the tasks I had to do as the District Veterinary Officer in Meru.

wouldn't need them, as you were eating here, and so Stanley brought them down from your house this afternoon. Don't worry, I'll return them in the morning."

Jo's experience in India and Zambia stood her in good stead, but the caseload was heavy, with only three doctors to deal with up to 800 patients a day. One day Jo and I discussed the apparently recidivist malaria patients who would keep coming back, the chloroquine that they had been given proving ineffective.

"Even when they are fevered, we can't find any parasites in the blood smears," said Jo.

"The symptoms sound awfully like undulant fever," I said.

"Brucellosis is quite common in cattle round here; that's one reason why we boil our milk. Why don't you send some blood samples off to the lab to test for brucella?" I suggested.

The first two came back positive, so now Jo could try a course of antibiotics as a treatment when blood smears proved negative. Jo and I began spending many weekends together. We paid several visits to Peter Gamble, District Veterinary Officer at Isiolo, and his wife Judi. They had come to Africa after the 1967 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the UK, where Pete had been drafted right out of veterinary school into the control campaign. After that the couple found themselves in the vastly different world of Isiolo, gateway to Kenya's Northern Frontier District.

On our first visit to the Gambles we arrived in time for a late tea, and then Pete said, "I've got to go up to a crush about five miles into the quarantine area before dark. The herdsman has reported a sick cow, so we could all go together for a bit of drive if you fancy it."

We set off into the hills to the west of the town. We saw many giraffe, as well as zebras, and several mobs of impala. We also saw large numbers of both yellow-necked spur fowl and vulturine guinea fowl, whose bald heads were circled by a narrow ring of brown curly feathers that looked almost like a monk's tonsure.

The brilliant blue of their breast feathers and the blue-and-white capes that flowed from mid-neck over their shoulders were quite magnificent.

We arrived at the crush, where a Boran herdsman had gathered a group of about 50 humped cattle.

The sick dun-coloured cow stood dejectedly at the front on the cattlecrush. Her temperature was a sky-high 105.4, the pinkish membranes in her mouth and eyes were spotted with numerous red splashes, indicating a blood clotting deficit, and the lymph nodes in front of her shoulders and on her flanks were the size and consistency of large, slightly over-ripe mangoes.

"This looks just like East Coast Fever, Pete. Have you got some slides?"

"I'm not so sure. It could be something else. Let's take a couple of slides and we'll stain them back at the lab. Can you tell this fella what we're doing, and that we'll come back in the morning and see the cow? Ask him to keep the cattle nearby."

We made the slides by nicking the cow's ear and catching a drop of blood on the glass, and by grasping one of the large nodes through the skin and punching a wide-bore needle into the soft meaty part of it. A squeeze of the lump, and some bloody fluid emerged from the hub of the needle. A finger over the end, out with the needle, and we had enough material to make thin smears on several glass slides.

Later, a look at the slides proved Pete right. There was no sign of East Coast Fever, but there were at least half a dozen little spindleshaped pale purple objects in each field under the high-powered lens of the microscope – Trypanosomes. Some types of this parasite, usually spread by tsetse flies, cause sleeping sickness in humans. But this species, Trypanosoma vivax, was transmitted by biting flies known as horseflies. The treatment was easy. A single dose of a German drug called Berenil, a yellow powder mixed up in sterile water, would do the trick.

To be continued…