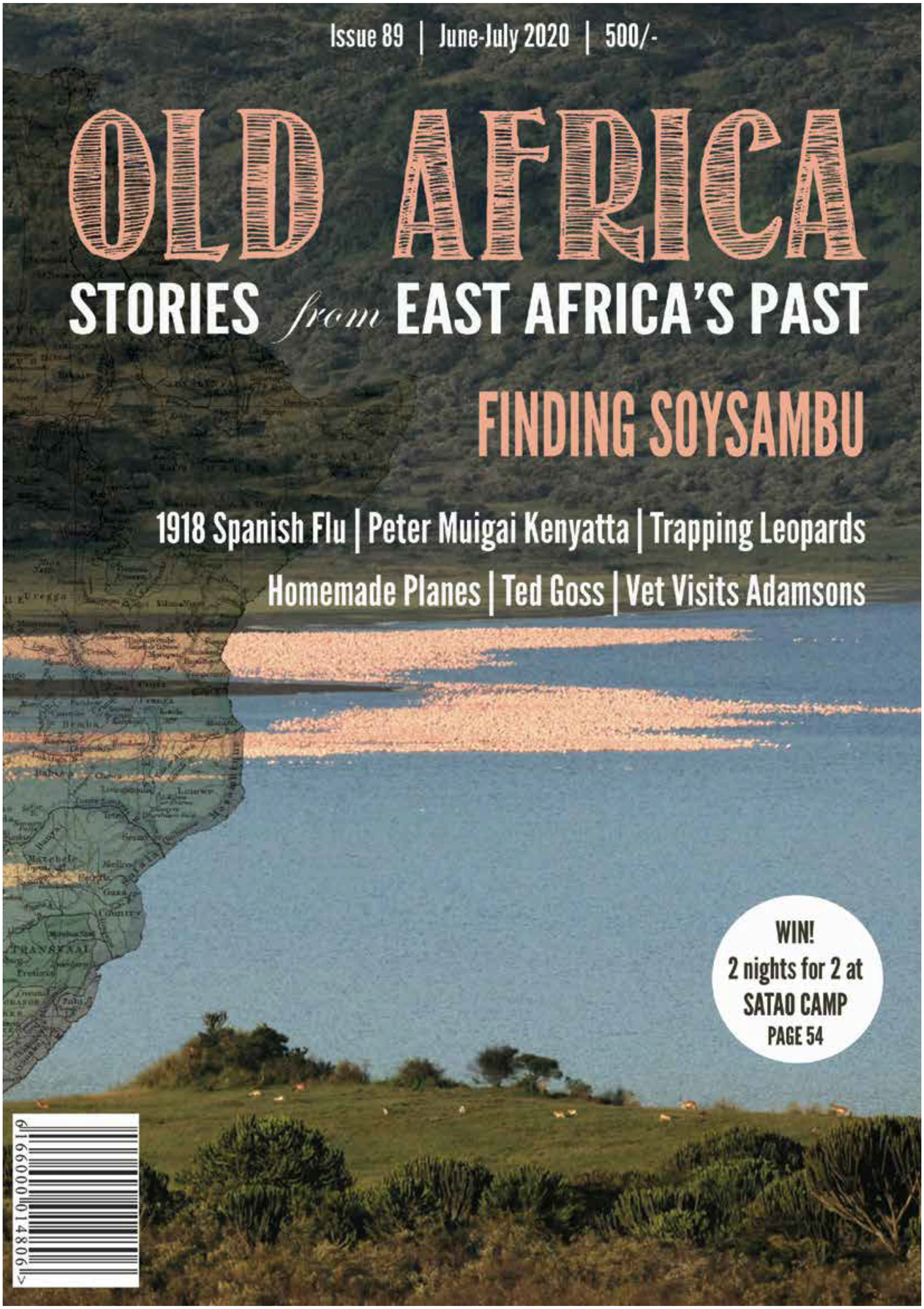
Issue 89 | June-July 2020 | 500/-
OLD AFRICA
STORIES from EAST AFRICA'S PAST
FINDING SOYSAMBU
1918 Spanish Flu | Peter Muigai Kenyatta | Trapping Leopards
Homemade Planes | Ted Goss | Vet Visits Adamsons
WIN!
2 nights for 2 at
SATAO CAMP
PAGE 54

WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 7

THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA

by Dr Jerry Haigh

In part 6 of Old Africa's condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book Wrestling with Rhinos, the author continued his adventures as a District Veterinary Office in Meru, and he met the love of his life. You can order the full book from the author's website www.jerryhaigh.com or from amazon.com

1968 Several months passed, during which Jo and I fished at Marimba together, travelled together, talked medicine together, and made friends together. Our relationship grew and I realized we were in love. After tennis on the evening of my birthday, I popped the question. Jo thought for a moment, and said, "I'll tell you on my birthday," which meant that I had to wait 19 days. I agreed to pick her up at lunch time on the day, and steeled myself to keep quiet and not pester her with repeats.

Late on the morning of Jo's birthday, a call to treat a farmer's cow for milk fever made me 20 minutes late for my all-important lunch date. When I pulled up in the car, she got in and sat in the passenger seat. "Well?" I said nervously as we headed back along towards the post office.

"Yes, let's get married, but not until after I go to Holland to see my Mum and Dad."

When I asked her what had made her decide to take the plunge, she said, "I realized that I missed you." That case of milk fever may have played an important part in our future.

Setting a wedding date was a challenge. The most logical time seemed to be at the end of my current contract in January, and so we picked the 25th. Robbie Burns Night: appropriate enough for an ex-pat from Glasgow, whose father had served for years in the Highland Light Infantry. I would have no excuse in future for forgetting the anniversary.

One afternoon, Kipsiele and I were at the cattle crush at Githongo when a battered old Peugeot 404 taxi pulled up. The passenger got out, a stout woman wearing a well-worn bright cotton print dress and a head scarf. The woman had a valuable Guernsey cow.

"When it tries to walk it grunts with every step," she said, and demonstrated, deliberately placing one foot in front of the other. "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! It seems to be in great pain. Yesterday it gave two gallons of milk, but this morning it gave no milk at all."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Near Nkubu, just above the mission hospital."

"We can go now. You can travel with us in the Land Rover."

We dropped down to the winding hairpin-corner route between Meru and Nkubu. There was only one cow at the farm. She was standing, looking thoroughly dejected, in a small corral made of twisted bits of lumber rather loosely attached to several crooked poles sunk at irregular intervals in the ground. A small calf with a rope around its neck was tethered nearby.

"Try and get her to enter the crush, so I can examine her," I said. I took her temperature, which was slightly elevated, and examined her chest and abdomen. The heart sounds were muffled, and more rapid than they should have been. The normal gurgles and squeaks that one should hear from the two compartments of the stomach on the left-hand side were simply absent. Not a sound. Same on the right. The entire intestinal tract had gone on strike. I placed my hand high up on the backbone above her shoulders and squeezed. Normally a cow will buckle slightly when this test is applied. This patient not only buckled, but let out a grunt of pain. I asked the owner to bring a six-foot pole and told Kipsiele to hold one end of it as we passed it under her body just behind the front legs.

"Ready? Lift." The cow let out an even louder grunt.

I turned to the woman. "I think your cow has eaten a nail, or a piece of wire. It has gone through the wall of her stomach and is hurting her. I can do an operation and try to find the nail."

I administered local anaesthetic to the nerves on the left side of the cow's stomach and skin, and then shaved the skin as best I could, using

half a safety razor blade with a pair of forceps as a handle. Next came a vigorous scrub with soap and disinfectant. Then I made a cut down through skin. The layers underneath it allowed the stomach wall, or more properly the wall of the rumen, or second stomach, to appear at the surface. Next, I gently ran my hand down beside and to the front of the rumen to search for damage. Right up near the diaphragm, I felt an area of rough tissue joining the rumen to adjacent structures. I knew my tentative diagnosis was almost certainly correct. The trick would be to find the nail.

"Kipsiele, please pass me one of those plastic gloves after I cut the stomach here. Don't touch my arm, but slide the glove over my hand and pull it up as high as you can."

After cutting through the wall of the rumen and sliding on the glove, I groped forward and downward towards the first stomach. A sharp pain in the ball of my thumb indicated I had found the foreign body. I grabbed it and pulled it out. It was a very sharp six-inch darning needle, large enough to be used for sacking. About four feet of dark blue heavy-duty thread was attached. As I held it up, the woman's eyes opened wide.

"It's not a nail, but it's a big needle," I said.

"I wondered where that needle had gone," she said. "I was using it to repair my daughter's school uniform. Then I couldn't find it."

I stitched everything back together, and after I had given the cow a generous dose of penicillin, we went on our way.

Soon Jo was on her way to see her family. She also faced the daunting task of travelling alone to Scotland to meet my parents. A couple of weeks later, I wrote my fourth letter to Jo in Holland:

"On Tuesday last I had a strange experience. The warden in Meru Park called me down to look at a sick rhino, one of the white rhino that came up from South Africa last year. (Of course we're not allowed to say South Africa, so the animals are said to have come from Lesotho.) Apparently this animal, a female, had been on heat, and a male had begun to court it. I didn't know this before, but a rhino's courting is a rather rough affair. The male had attacked the female and at one point had run her into a pepper tree after more or less picking her up on the end of his horn. The little old guard who tends the animals showed me the tree.

Jerry Haigh treating a rhino.

If you thought a cow would be more difficult to hear than one of your patients, just imagine this. I couldn't hear much, but the rhino was obviously uncomfortable.

"What to do? I took a blood slide, but there was nothing visible next day. I was foxed. I decided to give her a large dose of penicillin and trust to luck. The injection posed a problem. Luckily I had taken along some of my four-inch needles. I thumped her on the backside a few times, just as if I was giving her a friendly pat, and then turned my wrist over and drove in the needle. She took virtually no notice. I then attached the end of the syringe and started to inject. About halfway through the process, she realized that everything was not quite as it should be. She started to walk off, no doubt to get away from whatever it was that was causing the pain. I had to finish the injection at a dog trot!

"Yesterday, I heard indirectly that the rhino died a couple of days later. Apparently they found that she had some broken ribs, and the end of one of them had punctured her liver. Imagine the force that the male must have exerted!"

The Adamsons and their cats

Time dragged while Jo was away. Paul and Elma Sayer (now married) visited for a weekend. Early that Saturday morning, we set off for Meru National Park. Paul had an open invitation to

visit George Adamson at Mughwango, where he had his lion camp. George's godson, Jonny Baxendale, his assistant, had used my house as a staging post between the park and Nairobi. Jonny had made it clear that George would welcome a visit from us.

We had spectacular views over the Northern Frontier District as we headed round the north side of the Nyambenis among the small farms with their patchy tea plots. A quarter of a mile past the park gates Elma spotted a small group of cheetahs moving slowly through the yellow grass.

By mid-morning we arrived at the park headquarters and paid our respects to Peter Jenkins, the warden, who had picked up where the previous warden, Ted Goss, had been forced to leave off after being trampled and nearly killed by a partially drugged elephant.

"Morning, Peter," I said. "Sorry to hear about that rhino. I'd like you to meet Paul and Elma Sayer. Paul works at the small animal clinic at Kabete. He's done quite a bit with Toni Harthoorn."

"Morning, Jerry, Paul, Elma," said Peter, holding his inevitable pipe in his hand. "Can I offer you guys a coffee?"

"No thanks Peter. We are off to see George, and shouldn't arrive too late."

Film star Boy, sunning himself on the roof of George Adamson's Land Rover.

"All right. By the way, Joy says there's something wrong with one of her cheetahs. If you get a chance, call in and see her."

George Adamson lived in a simple camp near a rocky outcrop called Mughwango. He had been permitted to stay in the park to rehabilitate some tame lions. He had Ugas, the one-eyed lion upon which Toni Harthoorn had successfully operated, but also some animals that had featured in the film *Born Free.*

George emerged from the shade of his thatched lean-to wearing, as always, only his patched and faded khaki shorts, and a pair of the leather sandals known as chupplies. His frame, hardened by many miles of walking, carried not an ounce of extra fat, while his thin white hair, beard, and wrinkled skin spoke of years of exposure to the equatorial sun. We spent a delightful hour with him and his brother Terence, who happened to be visiting. At one time George and Terence had owned the Pig and Whistle in Meru, which these days was my occasional watering hole and source of Sunday night chicken biryani. The story goes that Terence's views on alcohol consumption had inevitably driven customers away. He would harangue anyone who ordered a second tot on the evils of drink. Not exactly the best way to run a pub!

As we sat inside the chicken wire compound, shaded under the open-sided hut that had been thatched with palm leaves, drinking instant coffee from tin mugs, he enthralled us with stories of his early days as a game warden.

A lioness came to check us out. She rubbed up against the wire, and George scratched her and made soft noises.

There were risks when attempting to rehabilitate lions. Peter and Sarah Jenkins' son Mark, had a close call right there near Mughwango. The lad, almost four at the time, had been bitten on the shoulder by Boy, of movie fame, as he sat between his parents in the middle seat of a Land Cruiser. Only the quick thinking of his parents had prevented him from being dragged out of the cab. Then a doctor at the nearby mission hospital had made the mistake of stitching the wound, which had quickly gone septic. With nowhere for the pus to drain, his arm had swollen up to a frightening size before the stiches were taken out and he recovered.

After a while George said, “Can you please call in on my wife as you go back? She has a lame cheetah.”
We took the hint and left, stopping for a leisurely picnic lunch in the shade of a thick mass of trees by the Rojewero River. Then we drove to Joy’s camp under two magnificent tamarind trees.
Joy emerged from her tent, dressed in faded military green shorts and a cross-over halter top. She brusquely greeted us in her thick Austrian accent.
“As George told, you my cheetah, Pippa, is lame.” She told us Pippa had hurt her front leg, but was nervous and frightened of strangers. Only one of us could examine her.
As Paul had recently passed his British Royal College Fellowship exams with a specialty in orthopaedics, we decided he should examine the patient. Joy warned us that we had to stay at least 100 yards away in the Land Rover.
“Fine,” I said. “Elma and I will go in the second vehicle. You take Dr Sayer,” I said. “But how will you get up close to the animal for Paul to examine it?”
Joy turned and shouted, in a crude Swahili dialect almost of her own invention, at a man standing no more than five yards away, for him to bring some goat meat from the fridge.
We drove back towards the park gate, and ended up within a hundred yards of where the three of us had seen the cheetah group only about six hours previously.
We watched as Joy got out of the vehicle and called Pippa. The cheetah rose lazily from her resting place near the cubs and walked over to the Land Rover, where Paul was leaning out of the passenger window. For the next half hour or so Joy petted Pippa, stroking the animal’s leg in a haphazard fashion as she chewed halfheartedly on a lump of meat.
Then Paul emerged and went over to Pippa. He gently ran his hand up and down the right foreleg, and then moved to the left. After a minute or two the cheetah winced as he manipulated the joint about six inches above the foot.
“That’s her carpal joint,” I told the others. “She seems to react when he moves it.”
We returned to Joy’s camp by the river and discussed the case.

“You’ve been feeding raw meat to her,” said Paul. “Does she get any offal or hide?”

“Oh no. She prefers the meat.”

“Does she kill for herself?” I asked.

“Sometimes. She has been teaching the cubs, and I saw her on an impala only three days ago.”

“Why do you continue to feed her?”

“I like to maintain contact, and she always comes when I call.”

“How often do you feed her goat’s meat?” asked Paul.

“I try to give some every day. Usually two or three pounds.”

“Well, both Dr Haigh and I have seen bone problems in cheetahs who are fed raw meat without offal or skin. They get a condition called metabolic bone disease, or osteomalacia. Sort of like rickets in young animals. It makes the bones very weak, and can easily lead to breaks if not treated. I suggest that you either stop feeding raw meat, which is extremely low in calcium, or get a sack of bone-meal and always feed it with the meat.”

“How much?” she asked.

“At least a large tablespoonful every day.You could dust it on the meat before you give it to her.”

“It is difficult for me to get bone-meal in the park.”

“I can arrange to order some for you and have it delivered to my office in Meru, if that helps,” I offered.

We left Joy’s camp and drove to Leopard Rock Camp, where we stayed in one of the bandas.

Years later I was intrigued to read Joy’s own account of the cheetahs and the incident with the injured Pippa in her book The Spotted Sphinx. There is a description of our visit (I’m referred to as ‘another vet’) in which she changes Paul’s diagnosis to one of a sprain and states that he prescribed Butazolidin.

One can only speculate about the sad events that followed almost two years later. Joy maintained her connection with the cheetahs. On the 21st of September 1970, she found Pippa with a broken leg. Attempts at repair did not work, and eventually the cheetah had to be put to sleep. I have always wondered how much goat’s meat Joy continued to use, and whether she used any more bone-meal after we sent the first sack down to the park. She never ordered any more through me.

...To be continued.