**THE DONKEY DOCTOR**

In Limuru, Kenya, there were plenty of donkeys everywhere.  Usually the men or older boys would use them for any kind of transportation or just hauling things for people in the area.  The young boys would haul large water tanks to bring to people who were regular customers.  The older men would use the donkeys to haul loads of goods like timber for the local merchants.  Unfortunately, there were many abuses and the animals were often injured or even killed.  The young boys would often race their donkey against each other that often ended in injury not only

to the beast but also to the young boys

.  I could see them from our property racing down the bad road that goes past our place, thinking, there is going to be a bad accident one of these days.  And there was an accident, but not from the young boys.  One of the older men had his donkey cart loaded down with so many bags of maize that the donkey could hardly walk, let alone carry the whole load.  The man kept beating the poor donkey, and the animal was trying to avoid his whip heading in the direction that would lead to the edge of the road where there was a drop off deep enough to overturn the cart.  The man was using a long black rubber tube to beat the animal, and would not let up until the donkey finally headed off the road and fell into the ditch with the bags of maize falling on top of him.  The man was furious and kept beating him. A phrase came to mind, “Beating a dead horse,” that matched the scene, except the donkey was still alive.

The Donkey Doctor would have been furious with the man if ever she was there.  If I had her number, I would have called her.  She was known in the area as a donkey advocate, always trying to exhort people to treat their animals better, certainly to stop beating them.  She told me once that the Kikuyu women beat their men and so the men take it out on their donkeys.  I first met her because our guard dog was hit by a car.  Since the dog was not technically ours, there was not much we could do about it.  The dog survived the accident.  I need to explain about the dog more.  It was a beautiful black dog, very shy, probably beaten itself.  It used to come to our property and “hang out” with our Masai guards.  For some reason, the dog loved & trusted them!  They would never approach us, but soon as the Masai guards showed up for guard duty, the dog would cross the street and “hang out” with them.  It was a strange situation, because the dog still had an owner.  When the dog got hit by a car, it stayed on the other side of the road until it got better, but now it could not walk right.  The dog would growl at anyone coming onto the property until the Masai told the dog it was OK.  It even growled at us, but since it made a great addition for protection, we let it stay.  The men didn’t seem overly fond of the dog and didn’t give it any special treatment or affection.  Still, we could see the dog looked forward to meeting our Masai guards.  One day the dog got sick and seemed like it was not going to recover.  I offered to take it to the vet, who I found out later was the famous Donkey Doctor.  She told me that they should have brought the dog to them earlier when it had gotten hit. She did what she could, but the dog’s hip was in pretty bad shape.  It seemed that this time all the bones the dog was given to eat were now blocked in its gut, because her hip had made the passage too small for the bones to pass. She was able to remove the bones, but told the Masai to stop feeding her bones or it could kill her next time.

The visit gave me a chance to see her property.  It was quite large, as were all properties owned by the Mzungu (or “white man”).  Technically, “alien residents”, or the white folks who were in the country at the beginning of statehood from colonization by Europe for many African countries.  She raised a certain kind of cattle that originated in Scotland, a beefy animal that was light tan in color.  She had dogs everywhere!  I would not get out of the car until I saw her approach.  When she definitely let me know that it was alright, then I got out.  I was very pleased that she led me on a tour of her compound, because I saw that she had rabbits.  With all these dogs, though, I was surprised that she didn’t have any trouble.  Thus began her lecture on how animals will respond as you want them to, once you give them direction and your expectations.  I thought to myself, I wonder if that works with humans.  But then I quickly realized why the dogs never bothered the rabbits; they were huge!!!  I never saw such big rabbits in my life!  The rabbits were as big as the dogs.  She had quite a strange place here with the rabbits and her cattle from Scotland, not to mention her attitude towards the donkeys. It may have been accepted and praised elsewhere, but not necessarily here in Kikuyu land.  I knew right then, that I wanted to breed her rabbits with ours, to “boost” our breed.

She told me that she fed them calf pellets instead of rabbit pellets.  I was not surprised, even though I had never heard of calf pellets before.  We just fed them Napier grass and our special mixture of feeds to boost their milk supply, cow and calf.  We raised our own rabbits using certain weeds from the garden and certain select vegetables.  I found out the hard way that cabbage leaves could kill the young ones.  We raised the rabbits to eat, so I could imagine her monster rabbits adding to our food supplement!  It took at least four rabbits to make a meal.  That meant we could only have rabbits, if there were no problems, at least twice a month!  Two of her rabbits would have been plenty.

You could never believe the problems we had raising rabbits, considering the wild dogs that roamed the area and the “Askari Ants”.  These ants were everywhere and seemed to know when the mothers were going to have babies.  One time I was waiting for one of my rabbits to give birth any day now.  Finally, she gave birth to seven beautiful brown babies.  But as I reached into the cage to examine them, I realized they were not brown at all, but were literally covered with the infamous Askari Ants, thousands of them on just one baby alone, biting them with their poison and eventually killing all seven!  I asked the locals what I should do.  They said to spread ashes around the floor of the cages and under the cages.  Others said that I needed to grease the legs of the cages with oil, lots of oil.  They also said that the Askari Ants knew when the mothers were going to have babies because of the blood in their urine.  I needed to make sure that the cages had something under them to catch the urine, at least from the expectant mothers, so that it doesn’t get into the soil and alert the ants.

I never was successful at breeding her rabbits with mine, they were just too big.  After killing three of my females in childbirth, I gave up.  We continued to visit the Vet every now and then because of our dog, cows, rabbits, and other animals that intermittently got sick.  Every once in a while I would visit her just to see the rabbits.  Oh, her place was also filled with about five or more donkeys recovering at a time.  Some would never be able to pull a cart again, but she still took care of them anyway.  We paid her in cash, but would add strawberry jam or strawberry rhubarb pie.  One of the brothers would make jam or pie for me to give to her, but a problem arose that I just had not foreseen.  It took one of the women from our farm to point it out.  Simply put, it looked like I was courting her with the jam and pie.  Here out in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Africa, a Mzungu man bringing jam and pie to a Mzungu woman, looks pretty obvious, except to me.  I never thought anything of it.  The irony of it all is that a Kikuyu woman had to point it out, and our cultures couldn’t be more different, but Kikuyu women are very smart; African women are very smart!  She knew that I would be having problems in the future, so she had to intervene and spell it out for me.

I eventually left Kenya for Zambia, but I have never ceased to be impressed with the Donkey Doctor and her love for animals.  The men were afraid of her, called her a white witch.  If ever there was a donkey whisperer, she would be it.  I missed Limuru with its unique life and beauty, but I was ready to move on.  Maybe the further I got from an embarrassing situation the better I would feel.  I will always remember her, especially anytime I am around animals, especially donkeys.