JAMES HERRIOT

Farnon guided me to a seat, ordered two beers and turned to face me. ‘Well, you can have this job if you want it. Four quid a week and full board. OK?’

The suddenness struck me silent. I was in. And four pounds a week! I remembered the pathetic entries in the Record. ‘Veterinary surgeon, fully experienced, will work for keep.’

The BVMA had had to put pressure on the editor to stop him printing these cries from the heart. It hadn’t looked so good to see members of the profession offering their services free. Four pounds a week was affluence.

‘Thank you,’ I said, trying hard not to look triumphant. ‘I accept.’

‘Good.’ Farnon took a hasty gulp at his beer. ‘Let me tell you about the practice. I bought it a year ago from an old man of eighty. Still practising, mind you, a real tough old character. But he’d got past getting up in the middle of the night, which isn’t surprising. And, of course, in lots of other ways he had let things slide – hanging on to all the old ideas. Some of those ancient instruments in the surgery were his. One way and another, there was hardly any practice left and I’m trying to work it up again now. There’s very little profit in it so far, but if we stick in for a few years, I’m confident we’ll have a good business. The farmers are pleased to see a younger man taking over and they welcome new treatments and operations. But I’m having to educate them out of the three and sixpenny consulting fee the old chap used to charge and it’s been a hard slog. These Dalesmen are wonderful people and you’ll like them, but they don’t like parting with their brass unless you can prove they are getting something in return.’

James Herriot is delighted to accept the position of assistant to veterinary surgeon Siegfried Farnon MRCVS, owner of a practice in the Yorkshire market town of Darrowby. Earlier that day, on a sunny June morning in 1937, the newly qualified vet had made his first trip to the Yorkshire Dales. Arriving at Skeldale House for his interview, Siegfried had shown James around the practice before taking the wheel of his battered Hillman for a whirlwind tour of the local farms. They are now enjoying a drink at a village pub, where Siegfried gives James a quick rundown of the job and the challenges of veterinary work in the Dales.

James jumps at the chance of a job, not only because he’s taken an instant liking to the erratic but charming Siegfried and to the breathtaking scenery of Yorkshire, but also

because he knows he's lucky to be offered a position. As the real James Herriot, James Alfred Wight, put it, 'the depression of the thirties was still lying over our profession like a dark blanket and jobs were desperately scarce. For every vacant appointment advertised in the Veterinary Record, there were eighty applicants and for those who did manage to find a post, the remuneration was often pitiful.' On top of this, the draught horse, once the mainstay of veterinary work, was rapidly disappearing in the towns and rural areas, so the young vet was entering a challenging world.

Later in It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet James muses on how he came to Yorkshire and what led him to become a veterinary surgeon. He envisaged a very different life to the one he has, his workplace now the fells and dales of Yorkshire, dressed 'in shirt sleeves and Wellingtons, smelling vaguely of cows'.

I could remember the very moment. I was thirteen and I was reading an article about careers for boys in the Meccano Magazine and as I read, I felt a surging conviction that this was for me. And yet what was it based upon? Only that I liked dogs and cats and didn't care much for the idea of an office life; it seemed a frail basis on which to build a career. I knew nothing about agriculture or about farm animals and though, during the years in college, I learned about these things I could see only one future for myself; I was going to be a small animal surgeon. This lasted right up to the time I qualified – a kind of vision of treating people's pets in my own animal hospital where everything would be not just modern but revolutionary. The fully equipped operating theatre, laboratory and X-ray room; they had all stayed crystal clear in my mind until I had graduated MRCVS.

An article in the Meccano Magazine had similarly caught the eye of Alf Wight when he was a pupil of Hillhead High School in Glasgow. He was a keen subscriber of the magazine and often read the 'What Shall I Be?' series, which included a feature on veterinary science as a career. That glimmer of interest was then sparked further when the principal of Glasgow Veterinary College, Dr A. W. Whitehouse, gave a talk at his school and invited any of those interested to visit the college. Alf followed up the invitation, talked further to the principal, and decided there and then that veterinary practice was the profession for him.

It was an unusual choice for a thirteen-year-old boy who had grown up in the city streets of Glasgow and knew nothing about horses or agricultural life. He was born in Sunderland on 3 October 1916 but his family had moved to Glasgow when he was just three weeks old, setting up their first home in a ground-floor apartment in the respectable working-class area of Yoker. His father, Jim Wight, worked in the shipyards on the River Clyde and his mother, Hannah Wight (née Bell), eventually set up a successful dressmaking business, which would keep the family afloat when Jim was later made redundant. Both were musical – his father an accomplished organist and pianist in local cinemas and theatres, and Hannah a gifted singer; Alf himself would inherit his parents' love for music.

While the teenage Alf knew little of country life, he had at the age of twelve acquired an Irish setter puppy, named Don, and there had always been cats in the family home. Don, however, was the main object of Alf's affection and together they would walk for hours in the city streets and parks, as well as in the Kilpatrick Hills and countryside surrounding Glasgow. The bond that existed between Alf and Don sparked a love for animals that Alf carried throughout his life and profession.

Alf determined upon getting the necessary grades to enter veterinary college, and he was always a diligent student, excelling particularly in English and Latin, less so in maths, with a great love for sport and music. He enjoyed his time at school, made friends easily and kept diaries, in which he poked fun at some of his teachers. With an already impish sense of humour and descriptive flair, he once wrote of his Latin master, 'Buckie was in a terrible mood today. Roaring and bellowing at us like a rogue elephant.' He also had a great enthusiasm for a number of pastimes, and loved to read, devouring the classics as well as the works of the great comic writer P. G. Wodehouse. His school career and indeed his life almost came to end when he caught the virulent disease of diphtheria in 1932, causing severe sore throat and headaches, along with painful abscesses all over his body. He recovered and emerged with a new lease of life, determined to embark upon a fitness regime he had read about, involving exercises and cold baths, which he followed religiously for several years. Whenever Alf set upon a new venture or pastime, he always applied himself with determination and enthusiasm and he liked to keep busy. Despite his illness, he left school on 29 June 1933 with the necessary grades to join Glasgow Veterinary College in September of that year, having obtained three Highers (Higher Education Leaving Certificates) in English, Latin and French. While modern veterinary students are expected to have a solid grounding in the sciences, the requirements for students in the 1930s were not so stringent.

When Alf first visited Glasgow Veterinary College as a schoolboy, he remembered Dr Whitehouse telling him that as a veter-inary surgeon he would never grow rich but have a life of endless interest and variety. These words proved to be more true than Alf could ever have imagined and capture the spirit of the James Herriot books. The diverse nature of his work is certainly borne out across the series, most notably in If Only They Could Talk when James attends to the birth of piglets in a cold farmyard byre. Just hours before, he had attended a glittering party of another client, Mrs Pumphrey, owner of spoiled Pekinese Tricki Woo, where, dressed in black tie, he drank champagne and danced the night away. As he gets into bed that night, the music of the ballroom still in his head, the phone rings and it's Atkinson of Beck Cottage: 'I 'ave a sow 'ere what can't get pigged. She's been on all night. Will you come?'

'Let's have it, then.' I trained the feeble beam on my patient. 'Just a young pig, isn't she?'

‘Aye, nobbut a gilt. Fust litter.’

The pig strained again, shuddered and lay still.

‘Something stuck there, I reckon,’ I said. ‘Will you bring me a bucket of hot water, some soap and a towel, please?’

‘Haven’t got no ’ot water. Fire’s out.’

‘OK, bring me whatever you’ve got.’

The farmer clattered away down the byre taking the light with him and, with the darkness, the music came back again. It was a Strauss waltz and I was dancing with Lady Frenswick; she was young and very fair and she laughed as I swung her round. I could see her white shoulders and the diamonds winking at her throat and the wheeling mirrors.

Mr Atkinson came shuffling back and dumped a bucket of water on the floor. I dipped a finger in the water; it was ice cold. And the bucket had seen many hard years – I would have to watch my arms on that jagged rim.

Quickly stripping off my jacket and shirt, I sucked in my breath as a villainous draught blew through a crack on to my back.

‘Soap, please,’ I said through clenched teeth.

‘In t’bucket.’

I plunged an arm into the water, shivered, and felt my way round till I found a roundish object about the size of a golf ball. I pulled it out and examined it; it was hard and smooth and speckled like a pebble from the seashore and, optimistically, I began to rub it between my hands and up my arms, waiting for the lather to form. But the soap was impervious; it yielded nothing.

I discarded the idea of asking for another piece in case this would be construed as another complaint. Instead, I borrowed the light and trekked down the byre into the yard, the mud sucking at my Wellingtons, goose pimples rearing on my chest. I searched around in the car boot, listening to my teeth chattering, till I came on a jar of antiseptic lubricating cream.

Back in the pen, I smeared the cream on my arm, knelt behind the pig and gently inserted my hand into the vagina. I moved my hand forward and as wrist and elbow disappeared inside the pig I was forced to roll over on my side. The stones were cold and wet but I forgot my discomfort when my fingers touched something; it was a tiny

tail. Almost a transverse presentation, a biggish piglet stuck like a cork in a bottle.

Using one finger, I worked the hind legs back until I was able to grasp them and draw the piglet out. ‘This is the one that’s been causing the trouble. He’s dead, I’m afraid – been squashed in there too long. But there could be some live ones still inside. I’ll have another feel.’

I greased my arm and got down again. Just inside the os uteri, almost at arm’s length, I found another piglet and I was feeling at the face when a set of minute but very sharp teeth sank into my finger.

I yelped and looked up at the farmer from my stony bed. ‘This one’s alive, anyway. I’ll soon have him out.’

But the piglet had other ideas. He showed no desire to leave his warm haven and every time I got hold of his slippery little foot between my fingers he jerked it away. After a minute or two of this game I felt a cramping in my arm. I relaxed and lay back, my head resting on the cobbles, my arm still inside the pig. I closed my eyes and immediately I was back in the ballroom, in the warmth and the brilliant light. I was holding out my immense glass while François poured from the magnum; then I was dancing, close to the orchestra this time, and the leader, beating time with one hand, turned round and smiled into my face; smiled and bowed as though he had been looking for me all his life.

I smiled back but the bandleader’s face dissolved and there was only Mr Atkinson looking down at me expressionlessly, his unshaven jaw and shaggy eyebrows thrown into sinister relief by the light striking up from the bicycle lamp.

I shook myself and raised my cheek from the floor. This wouldn’t do. Falling asleep on the job; either I was very tired or there was still some champagne in me. I reached again and grasped the foot firmly between two fingers and this time, despite his struggles, the piglet was hauled out into the world. Once arrived, he seemed to accept the situation and tottered round philosophically to his mother’s udder.

‘She’s not helping at all,’ I said. ‘Been on so long that she’s exhausted. I’m going to give her an injection.’

Another numbing expedition through the mud to the car, a shot of pituitrin into the gilt’s thigh and within minutes the action began with powerful contractions of the uterus. There was no obstruction now and soon a wriggling pink piglet was deposited in the straw; then quite quickly another and another.

‘Coming off the assembly line now, all right,’ I said. Mr Atkinson grunted.

Eight piglets had been born and the light from the lamp had almost given out when a dark mass of afterbirth welled from the gilt's vulva.

I rubbed my cold arms. 'Well, I should say that's the lot now.' I felt suddenly chilled; I couldn't say how long I had been standing there looking at the wonder that never grew stale: the little pigs struggling onto their legs and making their way unguided to the long double row of teats; the mother with her first family easing herself over to expose as much as possible of her udder to the hungry mouths.

Better get dressed quickly. I had another try at the marblelike soap but it defeated me as easily as the first time. I wondered how long it had been in the family. Down my right side my cheek and ribs were caked with dirt and mucus. I did my best to scrape some off with my fingernails, then I swilled myself down with the cold water from the bucket.

'Have you a towel there?' I gasped.

Mr Atkinson wordlessly handed me a sack. Its edges were stiff with old manure and it smelt musty from the meal it had long since contained. I took it and began to rub my chest and as the sour grains of the meal powdered my skin, the last bubbles of champagne left me, drifted up through the gaps in the tiles and burst sadly in the darkness beyond.

I dragged my shirt over my gritty back, feeling a sense of coming back to my own world. I buttoned my coat, picked up the syringe and the bottle of pituitrin and climbed out of the pen. I had a last look before I left. The bicycle lamp was shedding its final faint glow and I had to lean over the gate to see the row of little pigs sucking busily, utterly absorbed. The gilt carefully shifted her position and grunted. It was a grunt of deep content.

Yes, I was back and it was all right. I drove through the mud and up the hill where I had to get out to open a gate and the wind, with the cold, clean smell of the frosty grass in it, caught at my face. I stood for a while looking across the dark fields, thinking of the night which was ending now. My mind went back to my schooldays and an old gentleman talking to the class about careers. He had said: 'If you decide to become a veterinary surgeon you will never grow rich but you will have a life of endless interest and variety.'

I laughed aloud in the darkness and as I got into the car I was still chuckling. That old chap certainly wasn't kidding. Variety. That was it – variety.

On entering Glasgow Veterinary College, Alf had envisaged a career of looking after small animals, principally dogs. It soon became clear, however, that the college had other ideas.

And I knew exactly what kind of a dog doctor I would be. During the summer holidays between leaving school and going to the College, I carried a vision with me. I could see myself quite clearly, standing masked and gowned in a gleaming operating theatre. I was surrounded by nurses and on the table lay a dog which I was restoring to health by brilliant surgery. Or sometimes I was in a white coat under the spotless walls of a consulting room, ministering to a series of dogs, large, small, tail-wagging, woebegone, but all enchanting and all in need of my services. It was a heavenly prospect.

However, when I rolled up to the College with the new students to start the autumn term, I found that the authorities had no intention of encouraging me in my ambition. They had other plans for me. They were going to make me into a horse doctor.

Veterinary education had stood still despite the fundamental changes which were taking place and all our studies were geared to the horse. The order of priorities, as set out, was quite clear. Horse, ox, sheep, pig, dog. It was a little jingle, repeated over and over and pumped into us as we read our text books. Sisson's great tome, The Anatomy of the Domestic Animals, provided exhaustive descriptions of the bones, muscles, digestive system, etc. of the horse, then perhaps about a fifth of the space to the ox and so on down sheep, pig, to the poor dog pushed in at the end.

Glasgow Veterinary College was run on a shoestring when Alf was there, the government having withdrawn its financial support after it was decreed that Scotland only needed one veterinary college. Much of the tuition was undertaken by retired practitioners and centred on the horse-focused curriculum of a bygone age, but the students saw a lot of practice and in their final year they spent most of their days with local vets out in the real world. As a result, Alf gained some valuable practical experience working for the eminent Donald Campbell who had a practice just south of Glasgow in Rutherglen and Bill Weipers (later Sir William Weipers) who ran a small animal surgery in the West End of Glasgow where Alf could indulge his passion for dogs and cats.

In his final two years, during the vacations, Alf also worked further afield, in Dumfries in south-west Scotland at the veterinary practice of Tom Fleming, where he treated large farm animals. He also saw practice in Sunderland, with J. J. McDowall, and stayed with family who still lived in the city of his birth. Following an operation for an anal fistula – a condition that would trouble him for some years – he sat his final exams in July and then December 1939 and qualified as a fully-fledged MRCVS (Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons).

In the books, James heads straight to Yorkshire after graduation whereas Alf went back to the practice of J. J. McDowall in Sunderland. Although he was there only six months, it was an eventful period, during which he worked hard, day and night, for

very little money and often ran surgeries alone. He saw a variety of animals, including dogs, cats and farm animals, and helped at the South Shields Racing Stadium, where McDowall was veterinary surgeon in attendance. Alf drove a tiny and unreliable Ford car, a precursor to the rusty little Austin he would later drive in the Dales. He also picked up some invaluable tips from McDowall, known to him as Mac. Having been surprised not to receive any thanks after he'd just produced two calves from a farmer's cow in fifteen minutes, he was told by Mac never to make a job look too easy. 'Remember this, Fred. It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it!' – advice that Alf would later drum into his own assistants in later years. It was a dictum that both Alf and Donald, and their fictional alter egos James and Siegfried, would follow, always mindful that, when treating animals, you invariably have their owners looking on; how you behave around them is critical to your success in the profession. Donald in fact had a set of golden rules he always expounded, which included: be courteous and respectful to farmers; give everything a name and never admit you don't know what's wrong; and never leave a farm without injecting something, even if it's a shot of vitamins, just do something!

While working with McDowall, Alf also learned a great deal about the various types of people he would come across in practice, both the clients and his fellow veterinary colleagues. He liked his boss Mac and they became very good friends, but the elder vet had an explosive temper and a liking for alcohol – not an uncommon trait among veterinary surgeons in those days. Angus Grier, a character who appears in the first two James Herriot books, shares some of the foibles of McDowall, although Grier is a far more disagreeable man. If anything, Grier is more of a composite character, formed out of the horror stories Alf would occasionally hear from student friends who were treated as the lowest form of life when working as assistants in practice.

In If Only They Could Talk, Siegfried advises James to take a Border terrier in need of an operation to Angus Grier, who had previously treated the dog. An ill-tempered Aberdonian vet, Grier is based in Brawton, the fictional name used for the Yorkshire spa town of Harrogate.

As I came into the operating room I saw that Siegfried had a patient on the table. He was thoughtfully stroking the head of an elderly and rather woebegone Border terrier.

'James,' he said, 'I want you to take this little dog through to Grier.'

'Grier?'

'Vet at Brawton. He was treating the case before the owner moved into our district. I've seen it a couple of times – stones in the bladder. It needs an immediate operation and I think I'd better let Grier do it. He's a touchy devil and I don't want to stand on his toes.'

‘Oh, I think I’ve heard of him,’ I said.

‘Probably you have. A cantankerous Aberdonian. Since he practises in a fashionable town he gets quite a few students and he gives them hell. That sort of thing gets around.’ He lifted the terrier from the table and handed him to me. ‘The sooner you get through there the better. You can see the op and bring the dog back here afterwards. But watch yourself – don’t rub Grier the wrong way or he’ll take it out on you somehow.’

At my first sight of Angus Grier I thought immediately of whisky. He was about fifty and something had to be responsible for the fleshy, mottled cheeks, the swimmy eyes and the pattern of purple veins which chased each other over his prominent nose. He wore a permanently insulted expression.

He didn’t waste any charm on me; a nod and a grunt and he grabbed the dog from my arms. Then he stabbed a finger at a slight, fairish youth in a white coat. ‘That’s Clinton – final-year student. Do ye no’ think there’s some pansy-lookin’ buggers coming into this profession?’

Grier proceeds to operate on the dog, while niggling constantly at his student. Afterwards, Grier suggests James join him on a visit while they wait for the dog to wake from his anaesthetic. In the car, Angus launches into a long monologue cataloguing the many wrongs he’s suffered ‘at the hands of wicked clients and predatory colleagues’. He then inflicts on poor James the very humiliation he’s been railing against.

We drew up in a particularly dirty farmyard and Grier turned to me. ‘I’ve got a cow tae cleanse here.’

‘Right,’ I said, ‘fine.’ I settled down in my seat and took out my pipe. Grier paused, halfway out of the car. ‘Are you no’ coming to give me a hand?’

I couldn’t understand him. ‘Cleansing’ of cows is simply the removal of retained afterbirth and is a one-man job.

‘Well, there isn’t much I can do, is there?’ I said. ‘And my Wellingtons and coat are back in my car. I didn’t realize it was a farm visit – I’d probably get messed up for nothing.’

I knew immediately that I’d said the wrong thing. The toad-skin jowls flushed darker and he gave me a malevolent glance before turning away; but halfway across the yard he stopped and stood for a few moments in thought before coming back to the car. ‘I’ve just remembered. I’ve got something here you can put on. You might as well come in with me – you’ll be able to pass me a pessary when I want one.’

It sounded nutty to me, but I got out of the car and went round to the back. Grier was fishing out a large wooden box from his boot.

‘Here, ye can put this on. It’s a calving outfit I got a bit ago. I haven’t used it much because I found it a mite heavy, but it’ll keep ye grand and clean.’

I looked in the box and saw a suit of thick, black, shining rubber. I lifted out the jacket; it bristled with zip-fasteners and press studs and felt as heavy as lead. The trousers were even more weighty, with many clips and fasteners. The whole thing was a most imposing creation, obviously designed by somebody who had never seen a cow calved and having the disadvantage that anybody wearing it would be pretty well immobilized.

I studied Grier’s face for a moment but the watery eyes told me nothing. I began to take off my jacket – it was crazy but I didn’t want to offend the man.

And, in truth, Grier seemed anxious to get me into the suit because he was holding it up in a helpful manner. It was a two-man operation. First the gleaming trousers were pulled on and zipped up fore and aft, then it was the turn of the jacket, a wonderful piece of work, fitting tightly around the waist and possessing short sleeves about six inches long with powerful elastic gripping my biceps.

Before I could get it on I had to roll my shirtsleeves to the shoulder, then Grier, heaving and straining, worked me into it. I could hear the zips squeaking into place, the final one being at the back of my neck to close a high, stiff collar which held my head in an attitude of supplication, my chin pointing at the sky.

Grier’s heart really seemed to be in his work and, for the final touch, he produced a black rubber skull cap. I shrank away from the thing and began to mouth such objections as the collar would allow, but Grier insisted. ‘Stand still a wee minute longer. We might as well do the job right.’

When he had finished he stood back admiringly. I must have been a grotesque sight, sheathed from head to foot in gleaming black, my arms, bare to the shoulders, sticking out almost at right angles. Grier appeared well satisfied. ‘Well, come on, it’s time we got on wi’ the job.’ He turned and hurried towards the byre; I plodded ponderously after him like an automaton.

Our arrival in the byre caused a sensation. There were present the farmer, two cowmen and a little girl. The men’s cheerful greeting froze on their lips as the menacing figure paced slowly, deliberately in. The little girl burst into tears and ran outside.

‘Cleansing’ is a dirty, smelly job for the operator and a bore for the onlooker who may have to stand around for twenty minutes without being able to see anything. But this was one time the spectators were not bored. Grier was working away inside the cow and mumbling about the weather, but the men weren’t listening; they never took their eyes away from me as I stood rigid, like a suit of armour against the wall. They studied each part of the outfit in turn, wonderingly. I knew what they were thinking. Just what was going to happen when this for-midable unknown finally went into action? Anybody dressed like that must have some tremendous task ahead of him.

The intense pressure of the collar against my larynx kept me entirely out of any conversation and this must have added to my air of mystery. I began to sweat inside the suit.

The little girl had plucked up courage and brought her brothers and sisters to look at me. I could see the row of little heads peeping round the door and, screwing my head round painfully, I tried to give them a reassuring smile; but the heads disappeared and I heard their feet clattering across the yard.

I couldn’t say how long I stood there, but Grier at last finished his job and called out, ‘All right, I’m ready for you now.’ The atmosphere became suddenly electric. The men straightened up and stared at me with slightly open mouths. This was the moment they had been waiting for.

I pushed myself away from the wall and did a right turn with some difficulty before heading for the tin of pessaries. It was only a few yards away but it seemed a long way as I approached it like a robot, head in the air, arms extended stiffly on either side. When I arrived at the tin I met a fresh difficulty; I could not bend. After a few contortions I got my hand into the tin, then had to take the paper off the pessary with one hand; a new purgatory. The men watched in fascinated silence.

Having removed the paper, I did a careful about-turn and paced back along the byre with measured tread. When I came level with the cow I extended my arm stiffly to Grier who took the pessary and inserted it in the uterus.

I then took up my old position against the wall while my colleague cleaned himself down. I glanced down my nose at the men; their expressions had changed to open disbelief. Surely the mystery man’s assignment was tougher than that – he couldn’t be wearing that outfit just to hand over a pessary. But when Grier started the complicated business of snapping open the studs and sliding the zips they realized the show was over; and fast on the feeling of let-down came amusement.

As I tried to rub some life back into my swollen arms which had been strangulated by the elastic sleeves, I was surrounded by grinning faces. They could hardly wait, I imagined, to get round to the local that night to tell the tale. Pulling together the

shreds of my dignity, I put on my jacket and got into the car. Grier stayed to say a few words to the men, but he wasn't holding their attention; it was all on me, huddling in the seat. They couldn't believe I was true.

Back at the surgery the Border terrier was coming out of the anaesthetic. He raised his head and tried bravely to wag his tail when he saw me. I wrapped him in a blanket, gathered him up and was preparing to leave when I saw Grier through the partly open door of a small storeroom. He had the wooden box on a table and he was lifting out the rubber suit, but there was something peculiar about the way he was doing it; the man seemed to be afflicted by a kind of rigor – his body shook and jerked, the mottled face was strangely contorted and a half-stifled wailing issued from his lips.

I stared in amazement. I would have said it was impossible, yet it was happening right in front of me. There was not a shadow of a doubt about it – Angus Grier was laughing.

While working in Sunderland, Alf continued to scour the Veterinary Record for advertised job vacancies. Sunderland had been hit badly by the Depression and the long-term prospects of the job were not guaranteed, nor did Alf relish the prospect of working alongside Mac on a permanent basis. Of the few advertisements he saw, one was based in Thirsk, the job described as 'Mainly agricultural work in a Yorkshire market town'. He wrote for an interview, received a reply, and set off for Thirsk on that fateful morning in June 1940.

In the books, James arrives at the Yorkshire practice in 1937, whereas in reality, Alf made his way to Thirsk three years later, when the country was in the grip of the Second World War. The owner of the practice, Donald Sinclair, on whom Siegfried Farnon was based, was joining the RAF and in need of someone to look after the practice in his absence. Just a few days after Alf accepted the job, Donald left for the RAF, as did the practice assistant Eric Parker four weeks later.

As a result, Alf was left to run the practice single-handedly in an area he knew little about. Long days were spent visiting farms, where he would treat animals with an array of concoctions – Universal Cattle Medicine being the most favoured – in the days when modern drugs had yet to transform veterinary practice. The work itself was tough, as was navigating around the peculiar ways of Dales farmers and the impenetrable Yorkshire dialect. Alf's dreams of becoming a small animal vet in a city practice soon melted away, as he described in James Herriot's Dog Stories.

I spent my time in shirtsleeves and Wellingtons, trudging through mud and muck, wrestling with huge beasts, being kicked, knocked down and trodden on. As a city boy, thrown headlong into the kind of remote rural community I had only read about in books, I was like a poor swimmer trying to keep afloat in the deep end. I was acutely aware that I had no agricultural background and that I had to establish myself among farmers who had spent a lifetime with livestock and often had a jaundiced attitude to

what they called ‘book learnin’’. Life was very full.

Alf, grew to love his work and the community in which he worked, many of whom led tough lives but were honest, plain-speaking and often generous with their hospitality. Money, however was often in short supply and the practice finances were on something of a knife-edge when Alf joined. To supplement their income, he undertook tuberculin testing for the Ministry of Agriculture. The 1930s saw the development of a test for the bacterial disease, bovine tuberculosis (TB), which is dangerous to cattle and to people who drink infected milk. The goal was to eradicate TB entirely and the work, which paid as much as £20 to £30 a day, meant Alf and Donald could afford to employ assistants.

As he rattled about in his little Austin 7 and a variety of aged cars, Alf grew to love the hills and moorland of North Yorkshire, and after a hard day’s work he and his fellow bachelors, Donald and Brian, would share a pint or two in the local pub or attend the odd village dance. He soon met his future wife Joan Danbury, immortalized in the books as Helen, the two marrying at St Mary’s Church in Thirsk on 5 November 1941. At around the time he met Joan, Alf had signed up to join the RAF, keen to do his bit against the onslaught of Nazi Germany which in March 1941 had bombed his home city of Glasgow, badly damaging his parents’ home near the River Clyde in the process. He wasn’t called up until the following year and by the time he left for training on 16 November 1942, Joan was pregnant with their first child. The day Alf left was an incredibly sad one for the couple and the next few months would prove challenging for the young vet.

Alf was sent first to Regent’s Park in London where he was examined and inoculated and drilled ready for assignment to a training wing. The medical examinations at Regent’s Park involved dentist check-ups, where Alf had a tooth pulled out, an unfortunate experience that he related in Vets Might Fly. While he yearned to be back with Joan in Thirsk, he was nonetheless determined to do well in the RAF and the extract demonstrates how Alf utilized every life experience, however awkward or painful, as entertaining content for his books. In Vets Might Fly, James explains how his fear of dentists dates back to being trapped in a dental chair as a child, the great bulk of Hector McDarroch, a caber-tossing Highlands Games competitor, looming over him with a terrifying drilling machine. Nowadays he prefers much smaller frailer-looking types, such as his Darrowby dentist Mr Grover, so that ‘if it came to a stand-up fight I would have a good chance of victory and escape’. As a consequence, the unknown RAF dentist, nicknamed ‘the Butcher’, fills James with utter dread, and for very good reason.

I still don’t enjoy going to the dentist but I have to admit that the modern men are wonderful. I hardly see mine when I go. Just a brief glimpse of a white coat then all is done from behind. Fingers come round, things go in and out of my mouth but even when I venture to open my eyes I see nothing.

Hector McDarroch, on the other hand, seemed to take a pleasure in showing off his grisly implements, filling the long-needled syringe right in front of my eyes and squirting the cocaine ceilingwards a few times before he started on me. And worse, before an extraction he used to clank about in a tin box, producing a series of hideous forceps and examining them, whistling softly, till he found the right one.

So with all this in mind, as I sat in a long queue of airmen for the preliminary examination, I was thankful I had been to Mr Grover for a complete check-up. A dentist stood by a chair at the end of the long room and he examined the young men in blue one by one before calling out his findings to an orderly at a desk.

I derived considerable entertainment from watching the expressions on the lads' faces when the call went out. 'Three fillings, two extractions!' 'Eight fillings!' Most of them looked stunned, some thunderstruck, others almost tearful. Now and again one would try to expostulate with the man in white but it was no good; nobody was listening. At times I could have laughed out loud. Mind you, I felt a bit mean at being amused, but after all they had only themselves to blame. If only they had shown my foresight they would have had nothing to worry about.

When my name was called I strolled across, humming a little tune, and dropped nonchalantly into the chair. It didn't take the man long. He poked his way swiftly along my teeth then rapped out, 'Five fillings and one extraction!'

I sat bolt upright and stared at him in amazement.

James tries to argue otherwise but is promptly told to report back the following morning for the extraction. He awaits the appointment with growing apprehension, desperately trying to comfort himself with the assurance that the procedure wouldn't hurt.

I was nurturing this comforting thought when I turned into a large assembly room with numbered doors leading from it. About thirty airmen sat around wearing a variety of expressions from sickly smiles to tough bravado. A chilling smell of antiseptic hung on the air. I chose a chair and settled down to wait. I had been in the armed forces long enough to know that you waited a long time for everything and I saw no reason why a dental appointment should be any different.

As I sat down the man on my left gave me a brief nod. He was fat, and greasy black hair fell over his pimpled brow. Though engrossed in picking his teeth with a match he gave me a long appraising stare before addressing me in rich cockney.

'What room you goin' in, mate?'

I looked at my card. ‘Room Four.’

‘Blimey, mate, you’ve ’ad it!’ He removed his matchstick and grinned wolfishly.

‘Had it . . .? What do you mean?’

‘Well, haven’t you ’eard? That’s the Butcher in there.’

‘The . . . the . . . Butcher?’ I quavered.

‘Yeh, that’s what they call the dental officer in there.’ He gave an expansive smile. ‘He’s a right killer, that bloke, I’ll tell yer.’

I swallowed. ‘Butcher . . .? Killer . . .? Oh come on. They’ll all be the same, I’m sure.’

‘Don’t you believe it, mate. There’s good an’ there’s bad, and that bloke’s pure murder. It shouldn’t be allowed.’

‘How do you know, anyway?’

He waved an airy hand. ‘Oh I’ve been ’ere a few times and I’ve heard some bleedin’ awful screams comin’ out of that room. Spoken to some of the chaps afterwards, too. They all call ’im the Butcher.’

I rubbed my hands on the rough blue of my trousers. ‘Oh you hear these tales. I’m sure they’re exaggerated.’

‘Well, you’ll find out, mate.’ He resumed his tooth-picking. ‘But don’t say I didn’t tell you.’

James waits for almost an hour – his heart thumping as he watches other men leaving Room Four looking shattered, one person reeling as he holds his mouth with both hands. He eventually gets called in to meet the Butcher, who is described as ‘about six feet two with rugby-forward shoulders bulging beneath his white coat’. After a hearty laugh, he motions James to the chair, fills a syringe and after a few playful spurts in the air, he puts the needle in. A minute or two later, he then seizes some forceps and starts to grapple with the tooth, until a large crack indicates that the tooth has broken off leaving the root still in James’s gum.

He must have been gouging for half an hour when an idea seemed to strike him. Pushing all the forceps to one side he almost ran from the room and reappeared shortly with a tray on which reposed a long chisel and a metal mallet.

At a sign from him the WAAF wound the chair back till I was completely horizontal.

Seemingly familiar with the routine, she cradled my head in her arms in a practised manner and stood waiting.

This couldn't be true, I thought, as the man inserted the chisel into my mouth and poised the mallet; but all doubts were erased as the metal rod thudded against the remnants of my tooth and my head in turn shot back into the little WAAF's bosom. And that was how it went on. I lost count of time as the Butcher banged away and the girl hung on grimly to my jerking skull.

The thought uppermost in my mind was that I had always wondered how young horses felt when I knocked wolf teeth out of them. Now I knew.

When it finally stopped I opened my eyes, and though by this time I was prepared for anything I still felt slightly surprised to see the Butcher threading a needle with a length of suture silk. He was sweating and looking just a little desperate as he bent over me yet again.

'Just a couple of stitches,' he muttered hoarsely, and I closed my eyes again.

When I left the chair I felt very strange indeed. The assault on my cranium had made me dizzy and the sensation of the long ends of the stitches tickling my tongue was distinctly odd. I'm sure that when I came out of the room I was staggering, and instinctively I pawed at my mouth.

Minus a tooth, Alf was then posted from Regent's Park to Scarborough on the Yorkshire coast for initial training, arriving there on 19 December 1942. The endless marching and drill meant he soon lost the extra few pounds he'd put on during his first year of marriage. Happy to be back in Yorkshire, he enjoyed his time in Scarborough, where he was billeted in the Grand Hotel and easily passed his exams ready for flight training. While in Scarborough, he also went absent without leave several times to visit Joan – an act of rebellion, wholly out of character for a man who was very much a rule-follower. Alf's visit on 13 February 1943, on the day his son Jim was born, was his third unsanctioned trip away.

On 20 May that year Alf was sent to Winkfield aerodrome near Windsor, where he excelled in flight training and was one of only four men out of fifty to fly solo in a Tiger Moth, the RAF training aircraft, after just two weeks. He was then posted to Salford, Manchester, where he suffered considerable discomfort from an anal fistula again, which required two operations at an RAF hospital in Hereford, which left him in considerable pain and, in the eyes of the RAF, an invalid.

Knowing that his career with the air force was at an end, he was sent to Heaton Park in Manchester where he was assigned to stores, and he eventually left the RAF on 10 November 1943. Some of the stories of his time in the RAF were retold in the James

Herriot books, many of them humorous, but in reality it was a difficult period for Alf and he yearned to return to his growing family and to the job he loved.

In The Lord God Made Them All, James has returned to the Dales after a year with the RAF. He is pleased to be back at work but there is no gentle easing in for the young vet. The practice is busier than ever and he is soon bumping along the winding country lanes and farm tracks to a never-ending list of patients.

When the gate fell on top of me I knew I was really back home.

My mind drifted effortlessly over my spell in the RAF to the last time I had visited the Ripleys. It was to 'nip some calves' as Mr Ripley said over the phone, or more correctly to emasculate them by means of the Burdizzo bloodless castrator, and when the message came in I realized that a large part of my morning had gone.

It was always something of a safari to visit Anson Hall, because the old house lay at the end of a ridged and rutted track which twisted across the fields through no fewer than seven gates.

Gates are one of the curses of a country vet's life and in the Yorkshire Dales, before the coming of cattle grids, we suffered more than most. We were resigned to opening two or three on many of the farms, but seven was a bit much. And at the Ripleys it wasn't just the number but the character.

The first one which led off the narrow road was reasonably normal – an ancient thing of rusty iron – and as I unlatched it it did at least swing round groaning on its hinges. It was the only one which swung; the others were of wood and of the type known in the Dales as 'shoulder gates'. I could see how they got their name as I hoisted each one up, balanced the top spar on my shoulder and dragged it round. These had no hinges but were tied at one end with binder twine top and bottom.

Even with an ordinary gate there is a fair amount of work involved. You have to stop the car, get out, open the gate, drive through, stop the car again, dismount and close the thing behind you. But the road to Anson Hall was hard labour. The gates deteriorated progressively as I approached the farm and I was puffing with my efforts as I bumped and rattled my way up to number seven.

This was the last and the most formidable – a malignant entity with a personality of its own. Over decades it had been patched and repaired with so many old timbers that probably none of the original structure remained. But it was dangerous.

I got out of the car and advanced a few steps. We were old foes, this gate and I, and we faced each other for some moments in silence. We had fought several brisk rounds in the past and there was no doubt the gate was ahead on points.

The difficulty was that, apart from its wobbly, loosely nailed eccentricity, it had only one string hinge, halfway down. This enabled it to pivot on its frail axis with deadly effect.

With the utmost care I approached the right-hand side and began to unfasten the binder twine. The string, I noticed bitterly, was, like all the others, neatly tied in a bow, and as it fell clear I grabbed hastily at the top spar. But I was too late. Like a live thing the bottom rail swung in and rapped me cruelly on the shins, and as I tried to correct the balance the top bashed my chest.

It was the same as all the other times. As I hauled it round an inch at a time, the gate buffeted me high and low. I was no match for it.

Another thing which didn't help was that I could see Mr Ripley watching me benevolently from the farmhouse doorway. While I wrestled the gate open, contented puffs rose from the farmer's pipe and he did not stir from his position until I had hobbled over the last stretch of grass and stood before him.

'Now then, Mr Herriot, you've come to nip me a few calves?' A smile of unaffected friendship creased the stubbled cheeks. Mr Ripley shaved once a week – on market day – considering, with some logic, that since only his wife and his cattle saw him on the other six days there was no point in scraping away at his face every morning with a razor.

I bent and massaged my bruised ankles. 'Mr Ripley, that gate! It's a menace! Do you remember that last time I was here you promised me faithfully you'd have it mended? In fact you said you'd get a new one – it's about time, isn't it?'

While work resumes at a busy pace for James, not everything is as it was before. The small farmers, the bread and butter of the Darrowby practice, are soon to be a disappearing breed and a simple injection now has more of an effect than many of the age-old remedies they once poured down the throats of animals.

There were signs, too, that the small farmer was on the way out. These men, some with only six cows, a few pigs and poultry, still made up most of our practice and were the truly rich characters, but they were beginning to wonder if they could make a living on this scale and one or two had sold out to the bigger men. In our practice now, in the eighties, there are virtually no small farmers left. I can think of only a handful. Old men doggedly doing the things they have always done for the sole reason that they have always done it. They are the last remnants of the men I cherished, living by the ancient values, speaking the old Yorkshire dialect which television and radio have almost extinguished.

I took a last long breath and got into my car. The uncomfortable feeling of change was still with me, but I looked through the window at the great fells thrusting their bald summits into the clouds, tier upon tier of them, timeless, indestructible, towering over the glories beneath, and I felt better immediately. The Dales had not changed at all.

A daughter, Rosie, arrived on 9 May 1947 and the years Alf spent with his young children were some of the happiest in his life. Despite his heavy workload, seven days a week, he always made time for Jim and Rosie, taking them on his rounds or on trips to the hills around Thirsk. The family enjoyed the occasional holiday in the coastal town of Llandudno in North Wales as well as Runswick Bay and Robin Hood's Bay on the Yorkshire coast. Alf also played the piano and violin and took great pleasure in music. In 1949, he saved up and bought himself a radiogram so that he could listen to his favourite classical composers, from Mozart to Brahms, delighting also in the tenor Beniamino Gigli and jazz musician Duke Ellington, among many others. As a small child Rosie also loved to listen to music on the radiogram and to sing nursery rhymes or Bing Crosby tunes to her father as they drove around the farms on his rounds. Rosie and Jim inherited their father's love of classical music, but Alf wasn't so keen on some of the emerging rock and roll they played, describing their Elvis or Beatles records as being 'like the fiends of hell beating at the door'. Alf was a passionate cricket fan and a life-long football supporter, following Sunderland and Middlesbrough, attending matches whenever he could. The two sports were often the topic of conversation with his clients.

By 1949 he was in full partnership with Donald Sinclair, who by now was married and living with his wife in a country house nearby. Unusually Alf was offered a salaried partnership with Donald when he first joined the practice, receiving five-eighths of the profits while Donald was away in the RAF, and then a salary of four guineas a week on his return, along with a share in the profits from tuberculin testing. From 1946 onwards, Donald agreed to Alf having an equal share of the profits and then in 1949 a full partnership, which resulted in Alf earning more than Donald, largely because he continued to work full-time whereas Donald put in fewer hours. Alf and the family continued to live at 23 Kirkgate until 1953, when he bought a plot of land on Topcliffe Road, then on the periphery of Thirsk, on which he built a new house where the family of four lived for the next twenty-five years. Alf and Donald, however, continued to run the practice in Thirsk for more than thirty years.

While the 1950s was a happy decade for Alf, the first two years of the 1960s marked a difficult period for him. In April 1960 his father died suddenly from a heart attack, the shock of which caused Alf's emotions to spiral into severe depression. He had had a close relationship with his father – and it was some regret to him that his father never witnessed his later literary success – but there were other traits that perhaps made him susceptible to a nervous breakdown. He was a worrier but tended to bottle up his concerns in the pretence that all was well. He fretted about the education of his children, the future of the Thirsk practice, on which his finances depended entirely,

and any issues that cropped up with his assistants. He had always felt a sense of responsibility towards his parents and had a close but uneasy relationship with his mother. In the summer of 1960, when he seemed to be suffering the most, his mind haunted by paranoid thoughts and occasional memory lapses, he was advised to have electroconvulsive therapy. As we'll see in chapter ten, it has also been suggested that the strange symptoms he had previously suffered as a result of close contact with disease-infected cattle, as related in Every Living Thing, may have contributed to his nervous breakdown.

Alf battled on, always choosing to hide any inner demons, and continued to work full-time, which was probably the best therapy for him as a busy schedule occupied his mind and the landscape of Yorkshire always soothed him. Throughout it all, he was always a caring father and son, continued to write to his mother weekly, and took pleasure from gardening and playing tennis with his wife. In June 1961 Alf and Joan went to Majorca, on their very first trip abroad, on the insistence of Alf's old college friend Eddie Straiton, who offered him his holiday home and to cover his work at the practice. The trip aided Alf's recovery, as did a walking holiday later that summer, roaming the fells and valleys of the Dales and staying in youth hostels with his two children and a friend of Rosie's.

As he started to feel better, Alf was determined to live life to the full and this included seeing more of the world, visiting Russia and Turkey in 1961 and 1962 as an official Ministry of Agriculture veterinarian, a position that, as related in his books, former assistant John Crooks facilitated. Alf was a qualified vet, with experience working as a veterinary tuberculin inspector, so he had the relevant qualifications for the job. He included some of his diary entries from that time in The Lord God Made Them All, first explaining why he had made the decision to go to Russia, despite the less than enthusiastic response from some of his clients.

I should like to jump forward in time to 1961 in order to interpolate some extracts from the journal I kept of my Russian adventure.

John was behind it. Although he no longer worked for us he came back often as a friend and had been describing some of his experiences in exporting animals from Hull. He often sailed with these animals as veterinary attendant, but it was the Russian thing which caught my imagination.

'That must have been very interesting,' I said.

John smiled. 'Oh yes, fascinating. I've been out there several times now and it's the real Russia with the lid off, not a tour of the show places they want you to see. You get a glimpse of the country through the eyes of a seaman and you meet the ordinary Russians, the commercial people, the workers.'

‘Sounds great!’

‘And you get paid for it, too,’ John went on. ‘That makes it even better.’

I sighed. ‘You’re a lucky beggar. And these jobs come up pretty regularly?’

‘Yes, they do.’ He looked at me closely and I suppose my expression must have been wistful. ‘Would you like to have a go sometime?’

‘Do you mean it?’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Just say the word and you can sail on the next one. That’ll be some time around the end of October.’

I thumped my fist into my palm. ‘Book me in, John. It’s really kind of you. Country vetting is fine but sometimes I feel I’m sliding into a rut. A trip to Russia is just what I need.’

‘Well, that’s grand.’ John stood up and prepared to leave. ‘I’ll let you know the details later but I believe you’ll be sailing with a cargo of valuable sheep – breeding animals. The insurance company is bound to insist on veterinary supervision.’

For weeks I went around in a fever of anticipation but there were many people who didn’t share my enthusiasm.

One cowman cocked an eye at me. ‘Ah wouldn’t go there for a bloody big clock,’ he said. ‘One wrong word and you’ll find yourself in t’nick for a long long time.’

He had a definite point. East–West relations were at one of their lowest ebbs at that time and I grew used to my clients making it clear that Russia was one place they would avoid. In fact when I told Colonel Smallwood about it while I was tuberculin testing his cattle a few days before I left, he raised his eyebrows and gave me a cold stare.

‘Nice to have known you,’ he murmured.

Alf never again let his emotions get the better of him and his recovery from the nervous breakdown also coincided with more earnest attempts at writing, initially as a hobby. He wrote a collection of stories about farmers and his veterinary friends before then trying his hand at writing short stories on other topics, from football to human relationships. Writing served as an emotional outlet for feelings and thoughts that he probably found difficult to express in day-to-day life. The James Herriot that he portrayed in his later books is essentially James Alfred Wight – the deep affection he had for the community and landscape around him, for his family, for his dogs, they are

all in the pages of the books, and the man and author are indistinguishable.

Alf stopped working full-time at the Thirsk practice in 1980 but did not retire fully until the end of 1989. His near-fifty years of veterinary practice had, as he had been told as a schoolboy, certainly been full of endless interest and variety, and it was a profession he had always loved. While the elder practitioners he had worked with could be difficult, they had passed on invaluable advice, preparing him for the innumerable challenges that lay ahead – and the advice Siegfried gives James after his very first case in If Only They Could Talk does just that. James has had to put a horse down and deal with an ill-tempered client in the form of Mr Soames; Siegfried assures him that humiliation, ridicule and difficult clients are all par for the course in veterinary work.

'It's a funny profession, you know. It offers unparalleled opportunities for making a chump of yourself.'

'But I expect a lot depends on your ability.'

'To a certain extent. It helps to be good at the job, of course, but even if you're a positive genius humiliation and ridicule are lurking just round the corner. I once got an eminent horse specialist along here to do a rig operation and the horse stopped breathing halfway through. The sight of that man dancing frantically on his patient's ribs taught me a great truth – that I was going to look just as big a fool at fairly regular intervals throughout my career.'

I laughed. 'Then I might as well resign myself to it right at the beginning.'

'That's the idea. Animals are unpredictable things, so our whole life is unpredictable. It's a long tale of little triumphs and disasters and you've got to really like it to stick it. Tonight it was Soames, but another night it'll be something else. One thing, you never get bored. Here, have some more whisky.'

I drank the whisky and then some more and we talked. It seemed no time at all before the dark bulk of the acacia tree began to emerge from the grey light beyond the French window, a blackbird tried a few tentative pipes and Farnon was regretfully shaking the last drops from the bottle into his glass.

He yawned, jerked the knot out of his black tie and looked at his watch 'Well, five o'clock. Who would have thought it? But I'm glad we had a drink together – only right to celebrate your first case. It was a right one, wasn't it?'