I huddled deeper in the blankets as the strident brreeng-brreeng, brreeng-brreeng of the telephone echoed through the old house.

It was three weeks since Tristan's arrival and life at Skeldale House had settled into a fairly regular pattern. Every day began much the same with the phone ringing between seven and eight o'clock after the farmers had had the first look at their stock. There was only one phone in the house. It rested on a ledge in the tiled passage downstairs. Siegfried had impressed on me that I shouldn't get out of bed for these early calls. He had delegated the job to Tristan; the responsibility would be good for him. Siegfried had been emphatic about it.

I listened to the ringing. It went on and on – it seemed to get louder. There was neither sound nor movement from Tristan's room and I waited for the next move in the daily drama. It came, as always, with a door crashing back on its hinges, then Siegfried rushed out onto the landing and bounded down the stairs three at a time.

A long silence followed and I could picture him shivering in the draughty passage, his bare feet freezing on the tiles as he listened to the farmer's leisurely account of the animal's symptoms. Then the ting of the phone in its rest and the mad pounding of feet on the stairs as Siegfried made a dash for his brother's room. Next a wrenching sound as the door was flung open, then a yell of rage. I detected a note of triumph; it meant Tristan had been caught in bed – a definite victory for Siegfried and he didn't have many victories. Usually, Tristan exploited his quick-dressing technique and confronted his brother fully dressed. It gave him a psychological advantage to be knotting his tie when Siegfried was still in pyjamas.

But this morning Tristan had overplayed his hand; trying to snatch the extra few seconds, he was caught between the sheets. I listened to the shouts. 'Why didn't you answer the bloody phone like I told you? Don't tell me you're deaf as well as idle! Come on, out of it, out, out!'

But I knew Tristan would make a quick comeback. When he was caught in bed he usually scored a few points by being halfway through his breakfast before his brother came in.

Later, I watched Siegfried's face as he entered the dining room and saw Tristan munching his toast happily, his Daily Mirror balanced against the coffee pot. It was as if he had felt a sudden twinge of toothache.

Life is never dull at Skeldale House, especially when Siegfried's younger brother Tristan is around. Conflict is the norm between the two brothers as Siegfried attempts to instil in Tristan a sense of responsibility by doling out a variety of jobs around the house. Tristan, however, shirks from any kind of hard labour, preferring to prop up the bar at the Drovers' Arms or to catnap in his favourite armchair, preferably without Siegfried knowing about it. It's not that Tristan's mind isn't sharp – he'll often finish the Telegraph crossword while others are still wrestling with the first clue – it's just that his main goal in life is to enjoy himself and he'll go to great lengths to ensure he does.

In the early books, Tristan, who is five years younger than Siegfried, is studying veterinary medicine in Edinburgh and returns to Skeldale during his holidays but often stays long after he should have resumed his studies. Easily distracted, he is constantly failing his exams – much to the annoyance of Siegfried, who is footing his tuition bills. Like Tristan, Brian Sinclair, on whom Tristan is based, took a good few years to pass his exams, graduating in 1943 from the Royal Veterinary College in Edinburgh, ten years after beginning his training.

James frequently finds himself caught in the crossfire between the brothers, which invariably ends up with a furious Siegfried banishing Tristan from the house and practice. James is at first alarmed by this although he soon learns that the sacking is a regular occurrence and par for the course when the Farnon brothers live under the same roof.

Siegfried finally located the book he was looking for, took it down from the shelf and began to leaf through it unhurriedly. Then, without looking up, he said quietly: 'Well, how did the exams go?'

Tristan swallowed carefully and took a deep breath. 'Did all right in parasitology,' he replied in a flat monotone.

Siegfried didn't appear to have heard. He had found something interesting in his book and settled back to read. He took his time over it, then put the book on the shelf. He began again the business of going along the titles; still with his back to his brother, he spoke again in the same soft voice.

'How about pathology?'

Tristan was on the edge of his chair now, as if ready to make a run for it. His eyes darted from his brother to the bookshelves and back again. 'Didn't get it,' he said tonelessly.

There was no reaction from Siegfried. He kept up his patient search for his book,

occasionally pulling a volume out, glancing at it and replacing it carefully. Then he gave up the hunt, lay back in the chair with his arms dangling almost to the floor and looked at Tristan. ‘So you failed pathology,’ he said conversationally.

I was surprised to hear myself babbling with an edge of hysteria in my voice. ‘Well now, that’s pretty good, you know. It puts him in the final year and he’ll be able to sit path at Christmas. He won’t lose any time that way and, after all, it’s a tough subject.’

Siegfried turned a cold eye on me. ‘So you think it’s pretty good, do you?’ There was a pause and a long silence which was broken by a totally unexpected bellow as he rounded on his brother. ‘Well, I don’t! I think it is bloody awful! It’s a damned disgrace, that’s what it is. What the hell have you been doing all this term, anyway? Boozing, I should think, chasing women, spending my money, anything but working. And now you’ve got the bloody nerve to walk in here and tell me you’ve failed pathology. You’re lazy, that’s your trouble, isn’t it? You’re bloody bone idle!’

He was almost unrecognizable. His face was darkly flushed and his eyes glared. He yelled wildly again at his brother. ‘But I’ve had enough this time. I’m sick of you. I’m not going to work my fingers to the bloody bone to keep you up there idling your time away. This is the end. You’re sacked, do you hear me? Sacked once and for all. So get out of here – I don’t want to see you around any more. Go on, get out!’

Aghast at having to witness the fracas between the brothers, James is relieved when Siegfried sends him on a call. It’s nearly dark when he returns and, on driving into the practice yard, he spots a figure in the gloom. It turns out to be Tristan.

‘Sorry about the way things turned out,’ I said awkwardly.

The tip of the cigarette glowed brightly as Tristan took a long pull. ‘No, no, that’s all right. Could have been a lot worse, you know.’

‘Worse? Well, it’s bad enough, isn’t it? What are you going to do?’

‘Do? What do you mean?’

‘Well, you’ve been kicked out, haven’t you? Where are you going to sleep tonight?’

‘I can see you don’t understand,’ Tristan said. He took his cigarette from his mouth and I saw the gleam of very white teeth as he smiled. ‘You needn’t worry, I’m sleeping here and I’ll be down to breakfast in the morning.’

‘But how about your brother?’

‘Siegfried? Oh, he’ll have forgotten all about it by then.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Dead sure. He’s always sacking me and he always forgets. Anyway, things turned out very well. The only tricky bit back there was getting him to swallow that bit about the parasitology.’

I stared at the shadowy form by my side. Again, there was a rustling as the rooks stirred in the tall trees then settled into silence.

‘The parasitology?’

‘Yes. If you think back, all I said was that I had done all right. I wasn’t any more specific than that.’

‘Then you mean . . .?’

Tristan laughed softly and thumped my shoulder.

‘That’s right, I didn’t get parasitology. I failed in both. But don’t worry, I’ll pass them at Christmas.’

Once Siegfried has simmered down from their various arguments, he’ll continue to provide Tristan with more chores around the house – ranging from washing cars to mixing up medicines in the practice dispensary – all in a bid to keep his younger brother busy. Tristan, however, usually has other ideas and is nothing if not imaginative in avoiding his assignments.

He interpreted his role rather differently from his brother and, while resident in Darrowby, he devoted a considerable amount of his acute intelligence to the cause of doing as little as possible. Tristan did, in fact, spend much of his time sleeping in a chair. When he was left behind to dispense when we went out on our rounds he followed an unvarying procedure. He half filled a sixteen-ounce bottle with water, added a few drachms of chlorodyne and a little ipecacuanha, pushed the cork in and took it through to the sitting room to stand by his favourite chair. It was a wonderful chair for his purpose: old-fashioned and high-backed with wings to support the head.

He would get out his Daily Mirror, light a Woodbine and settle down till sleep overcame him. If Siegfried rushed in on him he grabbed the bottle and started to shake it madly, inspecting the contents at intervals. Then he went through to the dispensary, filled up the bottle and labelled it.

It was a sound, workable system but it had one big snag. He never knew whether it was Siegfried or not when the door opened and often I walked in and found him half

lying in his chair, staring up with startled, sleep-blurred eyes while he agitated his bottle.

Most evenings found him sitting on a high stool at the bar counter of the Drovers' Arms, conversing effortlessly with the barmaid. At other times he would be out with one of the young nurses from the local hospital, which he seemed to regard as an agency to provide him with female company. All in all, he managed to lead a fairly full life.

When Mrs Hall the housekeeper is away for a week, Siegfried decides that Tristan must help with the cooking and housework. It soon becomes apparent that his culinary repertoire consists of just one meal – sausages and mash – which, much to the annoyance of Siegfried, he serves up every day. Tristan is also something of a liability in the kitchen, particularly when he uses cotton wool soaked in ether to light the fire. James and Siegfried are horrified to hear a sudden 'whuff' noise rushing down the corridors, rattling the windows of the house. On dashing to the kitchen, they discover Tristan flat on his back on the floor amid pots and pans. Siegfried rages that ether is 'bloody well explosive! It's a wonder you didn't blow the whole place up!'

Tristan proceeds to clear up with a mop and bucket but, as soon as Siegfried heads out for the morning rounds, he stops and heads to his favourite armchair in the sitting room. Having had enough of the hot stove, Tristan explains to James that he has decided to roast the potatoes in the sitting room fire, ready for lunchtime. Siegfried returns, sits at the dining table, and is presented with an 'amorphous dark grey mass liberally speckled with black foreign bodies of varying size':

'What in the name of God,' he enquired with ominous quiet, 'is this?'

His brother swallowed. 'Sausage and mash,' he said lightly.

Siegfried gave him a cold look. 'I am referring to this.' He poked warily at the dark mound.

'Well, er, it's the potatoes.' Tristan cleared his throat. 'Got a little burned, I'm afraid.'

My boss made no comment. With dangerous calm he spooned some of the material onto his plate, raised a forkful and began to chew slowly. Once or twice he winced as a particularly tough fragment of carbon cracked between his molars, then he closed his eyes and swallowed.

For a moment he was still, then he grasped his midriff with both hands, groaned and jumped to his feet.

'No, that's enough!' he cried. 'I don't mind investigating poisonings on the farms but I

object to being poisoned myself in my own home!' He strode away from the table and paused at the door. 'I'm going over to the Drovers' for lunch.'

Tristan clearly has little interest in cooking or housework, preferring instead to cook up schemes to amuse himself. On picking up the phone at Skeldale House, he will sometimes answer using a ludicrous foreign accent – 'Allo, plis, oo is dis?' – farmers later mentioning to James that 'some foreign feller' had answered the phone when they called. When Siegfried comes up with the idea of putting magazines in the practice waiting room, Tristan smuggles in a German naturist magazine, complete with full-frontal nudity, just so he can catch out a worthy local citizen having a quick peek. The prank predictably backfires on him when Mr Mount, the father of a girl whom Tristan has been seeing, is caught red-handed and subsequently forbids Tristan from seeing his daughter Deborah any more.

Brian Sinclair was similarly an energetic prankster and would often answer the phone with a silly accent or call in from a public phone box pretending to be a local farmer in need of an urgent visit. Not content with playing pranks on Alf and their clients, Brian also took his mischief further afield. He once dressed in white sheets and after nightfall took himself off to Pannal Bank near Harrogate where he pretended to be the 'Pannal ghost'. Flitting across the bank in a ghostly manner, he would take great pleasure in seeing motorists making hasty U-turns and revving away. Such antics were recreated in Let Sleeping Vets Lie when James is scared half to death by the sudden appearance of a phantom monk dressed in a brown habit, which turns out to be Tristan up to his usual tricks. He subsequently learns that Tristan is behind the much-talked-of 'Raynes ghost' – a mysterious cowled figure often seen heading into the woods near Raynes Abbey.

Alf was often the victim of Brian's pranks, as James is in If Only They Could Talk when Tristan phones and imitates the gruff Yorkshire accent of Mr Sims.

Saturday night, 10.30 p.m. and I was writing up my visits when the phone rang. I swore, crossed my fingers and lifted the receiver.

'Hello, Herriot speaking.'

'Oh, it's you, is it?' growled a dour voice in broadest Yorkshire. 'Well, ah want Mr Farnon.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Farnon is out. Can I help you?'

'Well, I 'ope so, but I'd far raither 'ave your boss. This is Sims of Beal Close.'

(Oh no, please, no, not Beal Close on a Saturday night. Miles up in the hills at the end of a rough lane with about eight gates.)

‘Yes, Mr Sims, and what is the trouble?’

‘Ah’ll tell you, there is some trouble an’ all. I ’ave a grand big show ’oss here. All of seventeen hands. He’s cut ’isself badly on the hind leg, just above the hock. I want him stitched immediately.’

(Glory be! Above the hock! What a charming place to have to stitch a horse. Unless he’s very quiet, this is going to be a real picnic.)

‘How big is the wound, Mr Sims?’

‘Big? It’s a gurt big thing about a foot long and bleedin’ like ’ell. And this ’oss is as wick as an eel. Could kick a fly’s eye out. Ah can’t get near ’im nohow. Goes straight up wall when he sees anybody. By gaw, I tell you I had ’im to t’blacksmith t’other day and feller was dead scared of ’im. Twiltin’ gurt ’oss ’e is.’

(Damn you, Mr Sims, damn Beal Close and damn your twiltin’ gurt ’oss.)

‘Well, I’ll be along straight away. Try to have some men handy just in case we have to throw him.’

‘Throw ’im? Throw ’im? You’d never throw this ’oss. He’d kill yer first. Anyways, I ’ave no men here so you’ll ’ave to manage on your own. Ah know Mr Farnon wouldn’t want a lot of men to help ’im.’

(Oh lovely, lovely. This is going to be one for the diary.)

‘Very well, I’m leaving now, Mr Sims.’

‘Oh, ah nearly forgot. My road got washed away in the floods yesterday. You’ll ’ave to walk the last mile and a half. So get a move on and don’t keep me waiting all night.’

(This is just a bit much.)

‘Look here, Mr Sims, I don’t like your tone. I said I would leave now and I will get there just as soon as I can.’

‘You don’t like ma tone, eh? Well, ah don’t like useless young apprentices practising on my good stock, so ah don’t want no cheek from you. You know nowt about t’damn job, any road.’

(That finally does it.)

‘Now just listen to me, Sims. If it wasn’t for the sake of the horse I’d refuse to come out at all. Who do you think you are, anyway? If you ever try to speak to me like that again . . .’

‘Now, now, Jim, get a grip on yourself. Take it easy, old boy. You’ll burst a blood vessel if you go on like this.’

‘Who the devil . . .?’

‘Ah, ah, Jim, calm yourself now. That temper of yours, you know. You’ll really have to watch it.’

‘Tristan! Where the hell are you speaking from?’

‘The kiosk outside the Drovers’. Five pints inside me and feeling a bit puckish. Thought I’d give you a ring.’

‘By God, I’ll murder you one of these days if you don’t stop this game. It’s putting years on me. Now and again isn’t so bad, but this is the third time this week.’

‘Ah, but this was by far the best, Jim. It was really wonderful. When you started drawing yourself up to your full height – it nearly killed me. Oh God, I wish you could have heard yourself.’ He trailed off into helpless laughter.

And then my feeble attempts at retaliation; creeping, trembling, into some lonely phone box.

‘Is that young Mr Farnon?’ in a guttural croak. ‘Well, this is Tilson of High Wood. Ah want you to come out here immediately. I ’ave a terrible case of . . .’

‘Excuse me for interrupting, Jim, but is there something the matter with your tonsils? Oh, good. Well, go on with what you were saying, old lad. Sounds very interesting.’

Tristan delights in escorting young ladies to local dances and is a dedicated beer drinker and pub dweller. The bon viveur will also happily tag along to any social get-together, as Siegfried rages in Vet in a Spin when Tristan has clearly been carousing until the early hours: ‘If there’s a good booze-up going on anywhere, you’ll find it.’

Brian and Alf similarly spent many convivial evenings together at nearby pubs or escorting young women to local dances or the cinema. Like Tristan, Brian had a repertoire of party tricks which he would perform with gusto, especially after a little lubrication. On the night that Tristan and James take nurses Brenda and Connie to a dance in the village of Poulton – as featured in Chapter 2 – they first head to a local

pub. After downing a few pints, Tristan treats them to his legendary ‘mad conductor’ and is so absorbed in his outlandish performance that he almost knocks himself out.

Tristan raised his arms and gazed imperiously over his imaginary orchestra, taking in the packed rows of strings, the woodwind, brass and tympani in one sweeping glance. Then with a violent downswing he led them into the overture. Rossini, this time, I thought, or maybe Wagner as I watched him throwing his head about, bringing in the violins with a waving clenched fist or exhorting the trumpets with a glare and a trembling, outstretched hand.

It was somewhere near the middle of the piece that the rot always set in and I watched enthralled as the face began to twitch and the lips to snarl. The arm waving became more and more convulsive, then the whole body jerked with uncontrollable spasms. It was clear that the end was near – Tristan’s eyes were rolling, his hair hung over his face and he had lost control of the music which crashed and billowed about him. Suddenly he grew rigid, his arms fell to his sides and he crashed to the floor.

I was joining in the applause and laughter when I noticed that Tristan was very still. I bent over him and found that he had struck his head against the heavy oak leg of the settle and was almost unconscious. The nurses went quickly into action. Brenda expertly propped up his head while Connie ran for a basin of hot water and a cloth. When he opened his eyes they were bathing a tender lump above his ear. Mr Peacock hovered anxiously in the background. ‘Ista all right? Can ah do anything?’

Tristan sat up and sipped weakly at his beer. He was very pale. ‘I’ll be all right in a minute and there is something you can do. You can bring us one for the road and then we must be getting on to this dance.’

Brian’s ‘mad conductor’ performance was just as legendary in real life, as was his manic laughter which, like a baddie in a pantomime, he boomed out with theatrical glee. After attending the publication party of Let Sleeping Vets Lie in London, Alf’s son Jim remembers the streets echoing with Brian’s deranged laughter as they walked back to their hotel in the early hours. He and Alf were entirely used to his tomfoolery, whereas anyone who didn’t know him must have thought it very strange behaviour!

In the books, James develops a close friendship with Tristan, despite his sometimes strange behaviour, agreeing that he is something of a ‘rum lad’ (a typical Yorkshire term for someone who is a bit peculiar or mischievous) but who is ‘very sound. His humour and zest for life had lightened my days.’ Tristan continues to work as an assistant at the Darrowby practice and by the time of Let Sleeping Vets Lie he is in his final year. He is quick to learn, seemingly able to absorb information without any effort on his part, so that eventually by the time of Vet in Harness, Tristan graduates as a veterinary surgeon.

James is glad of Tristan's help at the practice. The local farmers had always liked Tristan when he did the occasional visit as a student and the young vet soon proves himself adept at the job. Positive comments start to come in thick and fast, many of which emphasize Tristan's commitment to his work: 'He meks some queer noises but he does try. I think he'd kill 'isself afore he'd give up.' As James discovers, it's clear that Tristan has developed a unique way of dealing with their clients, often putting on a kind of theatrical performance that elicits admiration from even the most hard-bitten types. On one call-out James joins Tristan as he calves a cow belonging to Mr Dowson, a hard and apparently emotionless character. He arrives just as Tristan is inserting his arm into a large red cow, while the farmer is holding the tail.

He braced himself and reached as far forward as he could, and just then the cow's flanks bulged as she strained hard against him. This is never very nice; the powerful contractions of the uterus squeeze the arm relentlessly between calf and pelvis and you have to grit your teeth till it passes off.

Tristan, however, went a little further.

'Ooh! Aah! Ouch!' he cried. Then as the animal still kept up the pressure he went into a gasping groan. When she finally relaxed he stood there quite motionless for a few seconds, his head hanging down as though the experience had drained him of all his strength.

The farmer drew on his pipe and regarded him impassively. Throughout the years I had known Mr Dowson I had never seen any particular emotion portrayed in those hard eyes and craggy features. In fact it had always seemed to me that I could have dropped down dead in front of him and he wouldn't even blink.

My colleague continued his struggle and the cow, entering into the spirit of the game, fought back with a will. Some animals will stand quietly and submit to all kinds of internal interference but this was a strainer; every movement of the arm within her was answered by a violent expulsive effort. I had been through it a hundred times and I could almost feel the grinding pressure on the wrist, the helpless numbing of the fingers.

Tristan showed what he thought about it all by a series of heart-rending sounds. His repertoire was truly astounding and he ranged from long harrowing moans through shrill squeals to an almost tearful whimpering.

At first Mr Dowson appeared oblivious to the whole business, puffing smoke, glancing occasionally through the byre door, scratching at the bristle on his chin. But as the minutes passed his eyes were dragged more and more to the suffering creature before him until his whole attention was riveted on the young man.

And in truth he was worth watching because Tristan added to his vocal performance an extraordinary display of facial contortions. He sucked in his cheeks, rolled his eyes, twisted his lips, did everything in fact but wiggle his ears. And there was no doubt he was getting through to Mr Dowson. As the noises and grimaces became more extravagant the farmer showed signs of growing uneasiness; he darted anxious glances at my colleague and occasionally his pipe trembled violently. Like me, he clearly thought some dreadful climax was at hand.

As if trying to bring matters to a head, the cow started to build up to a supreme effort. She straddled her legs wide, grunted deeply and went into a prolonged heave. As her back arched Tristan opened his mouth wide in a soundless protest then little panting cries began to escape him. This, I thought, was his most effective ploy yet; a long-drawn 'Aah . . . aah . . . aah . . .' creeping gradually up the scale and building increasing tension in his audience. My toes were curling with apprehension when, with superb timing, he released a sudden piercing scream.

That was when Mr Dowson cracked. His pipe had almost wobbled from his mouth but now he stuffed it into his pocket and rushed to Tristan's side.

'Ista all right, young man?' he enquired hoarsely.

My colleague, his face a mask of anguish, did not reply.

The farmer tried again. 'Will ah get you a cup o' tea?'

For a moment Tristan made no response, then, eyes closed, he nodded dumbly.

Mr Dowson scampered eagerly from the byre and within minutes returned with a steaming mug. After that I had to shake my head to dispel the feeling of unreality. It couldn't be true, this vision of the hard-bitten farmer feeding the tea to the young man in sips, cradling the lolling head in a horny hand. Tristan was still inside the cow, still apparently semiconscious with pain but submitting helplessly to the farmer's ministrations.

With a sudden lunge he produced one of the calf's legs and as he flopped against the cow's rump he was rewarded with another long gulp of tea. After the first leg the rest wasn't so bad and the second leg and the calf itself soon followed.

As the little creature landed wriggling on the floor Tristan collapsed on his knees beside it and extended a trembling hand towards a pile of hay, prepared to give the new arrival a rub down.

Mr Dowson would have none of it.

‘George!’ he bellowed to one of his men in the yard. ‘Get in ’ere and wisp this calf!’ Then solicitously to Tristan, ‘You maun come into t’house, lad, and have a drop o’ brandy. You’re about all in.’

The dream continued in the farm kitchen and I watched disbelievingly as my colleague fought his way back to health and strength with the aid of several stiff measures of Martell Three Star. I had never had treatment like this and a wave of envy swept over me as I wondered whether it was worth adopting Tristan’s system.

But I still have never found the courage to try it.

Once Tristan has graduated, however, he doesn’t stay long at the Darrowby practice because, like many others during the war, he is army bound and leaves soon after James joins the RAF. James volunteered earlier than Tristan, when there was no need for vets in the military but, by the time Tristan signs up they are crying out for medics to doctor horses, mules and other animals in the Far East. It’s no surprise, James muses, that Tristan landed on his feet: ‘The timing suggested that the gods were looking after him as usual. In fact I think the gods love people like Tristan who sway effortlessly before the winds of fate and spring back with a smile, looking on life always with blithe optimism.’ Tristan ends the war as Captain Farnon of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. He has also married and goes on to join the Ministry of Agriculture as an Infertility Investigations Officer. ‘He left a sad gap in our lives, but fortunately we still saw him and his wife regularly,’ writes James, and the two young men remain good friends, despite spending less time in other’s company.

Their paths, however, cross in The Lord God Made Them All after James calls in the services of a sterility advisory officer. As featured in Chapter 7, James attempts to use for the first time an artificial vagina (AV) to retrieve a semen sample from a bull but instead ends up using the AV to fight off the incensed animal. The next day, on returning to the yard, James sees a familiar figure ahead, blowing out clouds of cigarette smoke – it turns out be Tristan who is the sterility officer come to his aid. James explains to him the whole sorry incident with the bull and Tristan cannot quite believe how much danger James had put himself in. As James continues to tell Tristan what happened, Tristan begins to laugh so much ‘tears coursed down his cheeks and feeble little moans issued from his mouth’. Tristan clearly is still as animated as ever, although he appears a little more businesslike when they return to see the bull together. Tristan confidently attends to the bull, but things start to go wrong when, unbeknown to him, the farmer has filled the AV with boiling water, causing the animal to emit a deafening bellow when Tristan plunges its penis into the contraption.

Tristan, slightly pop-eyed, managed to jam the AV over the penis as it hurtled past him but as he did so the velocity of the charge caused the animal to lose his footing so that the bull slid on his back clean underneath the cow. The AV was jerked from Tristan’s grasp and soared high into the air. Mr Hartley followed it, open-mouthed, as it

described a graceful parabola before landing on a pile of straw at the other end of the yard. As the bull scrambled to his feet Tristan strolled unhurriedly towards the straw. The glass tube was still attached to the cylinder and my friend held it up at eye level.

‘Ah yes,’ he murmured. ‘A nice 3 cc sample.’

The farmer came puffing up. ‘You’ve got what you wanted, ’ave you?’

‘Yes indeed,’ Tristan replied airily. ‘Exactly what I wanted.’

The farmer shook his head wonderingly. ‘By ’ell, it’s a complicated sort o’ business, isn’t it?’

‘Ah well.’ Tristan shrugged his shoulders. ‘It can be just a little at times, it can be. Anyway, I’ll get my microscope from the car and examine the sample.’

It didn’t take long and soon afterwards we were all having a cup of tea in the kitchen. My colleague put down his cup and reached for a scone. ‘That’s a fine fertile bull you have there, Mr Hartley.’

‘Eee, that’s champion.’ The farmer rubbed his hands. ‘I paid a fair bit o’ brass for ’im and it’s grand to know he’s up to scratch.’ He looked across at the young man with undisguised admiration. ‘You’ve done a grand job and I’m right grateful to you.’ As I sipped my tea the thought occurred to me that despite the passage of years things hadn’t changed. Just as that glass tube had landed on a soft bed of straw, Tristan always landed on his feet.

Brian Sinclair similarly worked for the Royal Army Veterinary Corps in India and then, like Tristan, worked for the Ministry of Agriculture in Inverness, Scotland, until 1949 after which he returned to Leeds, Yorkshire. By then he had a wife, Sheila, having realized during the war that she was the girl for him when at a pub in Kilburn, she laughed so hard at one of his jokes that dandelion and burdock came spurting out of her nose. Sheila and Brian went on to have three daughters and remained good friends with Joan and Alf in later years. Brian was always very happy to be featured in the Herriot books and even consulted with Alf on the first book, providing some useful additions to the storylines as well as suggestions for some of the colourful dialogue Siegfried would mete out to him when he was particularly enraged.

Tristan was not the only student to work at Skeldale House; a variety of other young men – still all men in those days – helped out during their vacations, the profession attracting a broad range of characters. They vary in capability but James generally finds working with them a rewarding process, as he describes in Let Sleeping Vets Lie.

I always liked having a student with us. These young men had to see at least six

months' practice on their way through college and most of their vacations were spent going round with a vet.

We, of course, had our own resident student in Tristan but he was in a different category; he didn't have to be taught anything – he seemed to know things, to absorb knowledge without apparent effort or indeed without showing interest. If you took Tristan to a case he usually spent his time on the farm sitting in the car reading his Daily Mirror and smoking Woodbines.

There were all types among the others – some from the country, some from the towns, some dull-witted, some bright – but as I say, I liked having them.

For one thing, these visiting students were good company in the car. A big part of a country vet's life consists of solitary driving and it was a relief to be able to talk to somebody. It was wonderful, too, to have a gate-opener. Some of the outlying farms were approached through long, gated roads – one which always struck terror into me had eight gates – and it is hard to convey the feeling of sheer luxury when somebody else leaped out and opened them.

And there was another little pleasure; asking the students questions. My own days of studying and examinations were still fresh in my memory and on top of that I had all the vast experience of nearly three years of practice. It gave me a feeling of power to drop casual little queries about the cases we saw and watch the lads squirm as I had so recently squirmed myself. I suppose that even in those early days I was forming a pattern for later life; unknown to myself I was falling into the way of asking a series of my own pet questions as all examiners are liable to do and many years later I overheard one youngster asking another, 'Has he grilled you on the causes of fits in calves yet? Don't worry, he will.' That made me feel suddenly old but there was compensation on another occasion when a newly qualified ex-student rushed up to me and offered to buy me all the beer I could drink. 'You know what the examiner asked me in the final oral? The causes of fits in calves! By God I paralysed him – he had to beg me to stop talking.'

And students were useful in other ways. They ran and got things out of the car boot, they pulled a rope at calvings, they were skilled assistants at operations, they were a repository for my worries and doubts; it isn't too much to say that during their brief visits they revolutionized my life.

In the same chapter, James eagerly awaits his next protégé, a student recommended by the Ministry of Agriculture as a first-class student, who is arriving by train at Darrowby station. On meeting, however, it's soon clear this young man is very different to anyone they've had before at the practice.

'My name is Carmody.'

‘Ah yes, good. How are you?’ We shook hands and I took in the fine check suit and tweedy hat, the shining brogues and pigskin case. This was a very superior student, in fact a highly impressive young man. About a couple of years younger than myself but with a mature air in the set of his broad shoulders and the assurance on his strong, high-coloured face.

Unlike other students, Richard Carmody is not particularly impressed when James shows him round the surgery, although he shows a glimmer of approval when taking in the garden and the fell views beyond. The next morning, James takes Carmody to visit a lame calf, the young student now dressed in a smart hacking jacket and flannels. After the call, Carmody coolly tells James he thinks his diagnosis is wrong. Taken aback, James makes a mental note to keep Carmody well away from Siegfried, who would unhesitatingly hurl him out of the car at such an affront. Then, following a visit to a cow with slow fever (acetonaemia), James casually questions Carmody on the causes of the condition. Carmody confidently rattles off all the latest scientific theories, leaving James a little dumbfounded.

I slumped lower in my seat and decided not to ask Carmody any more questions and as the stone walls flipped past the windows I began to face up to the gradually filtering perception that this was a superior being next to me. It was depressing to ponder on the fact that not only was he big, good-looking, completely sure of himself but brilliant as well. Also, I thought bitterly, he had every appearance of being rich.

Carmody remains remarkably assured throughout the morning until the two men head to their last call before lunch where, having just opened the farm gate, the young vet’s composure is put to the test.

Apparently from nowhere an evil-looking little black cur dog glided silently out, sank its teeth with dedicated venom into Carmody’s left buttock and slunk away.

Not even the most monolithic dignity can survive being bitten deeply and without warning in the backside. Carmody screamed, leaped in the air clutching his rear, then swarmed to the top of the gate with the agility of a monkey.

By the afternoon, Carmody has recovered some of his poise and asks James, with a touch of arrogance, whether he can perform some injections. James then tasks him with a variety of difficult and dirty jobs: chasing a litter of pigs around a pen so they splatter filth all over him; treating an unwilling old carthorse with Istin drenching liquid, most of which ends up on his expensive clothes; and finally taking some blood samples from a large white sow. James takes pleasure in seeing all of this, surprised to detect a vein of sadism in his make-up.

Extracting a few ccs of blood from the ear vein of a struggling pig is a job which makes

most vets shudder and it was clearly a dirty trick to ask a student to do it, but the memory of his coldly confident request at the beginning of the afternoon seemed to have stilled my conscience.

The two young vets then visit a bullock that has a tumour on its jaw, which, when a halter rope is placed over his head, bolts ‘like a black thunderbolt’ across a field, with Carmody hanging on for dear life.

He took a last few soaring, swooping steps then he was down on his face. But he didn’t let go. The bullock, going better than ever, had turned towards us now, dragging the inert form apparently without effort, and I winced as I saw it was headed straight for a long row of cowpats.

It was when Carmody was skidding face down through the third heap of muck that I suddenly began to like him. And when he finally did have to release his hold and lay for a moment motionless on the grass I hurried over to help him up. He thanked me briefly then looked calmly across the field at a sight which is familiar to every veterinary surgeon – his patient thundering out of sight across the far horizon.

The student was almost unrecognizable. His clothes and face were plastered with filth except where the saffron streaks of the Istin showed up like war paint, he smelt abominably, he had been bitten in the backside, nothing had really gone right for him all day yet he was curiously undefeated. I smiled to myself. It was no good judging this bloke by ordinary standards; I could recognize the seeds of greatness when I saw them.

Carmody stays with the Darrowby practice for two weeks, after which, not unsurprisingly, he qualifies with top marks before gaining a PhD and further degrees and qualifications. The character of Carmody was in fact based on the assistant Oliver Murphy who worked at 23 Kirkgate in 1956 for four months. Like Carmody, he was serious, with a great academic mind, but Alf found him pleasant to work with and local farmers admired his dogged perseverance under trying circumstances. He returned one day caked in mud having chased wild bullocks around a yard, even hanging upside down from a beam in a rodeo-style attempt to catch one.

Another two assistants would feature in the books, although in reality over thirty assistants worked at the Thirsk practice, all of them providing a rich array of stories for the James Herriot books. Alf gave his students a lot of support and they in turn learned a huge amount and provided invaluable help during busy periods, particularly during tuberculin testing.

The assistant John Crooks features in the last two books. Having worked with the practice during university vacations, he is almost part of the family when he joins them as an assistant. He soon proves himself a capable veterinary surgeon and stays with

the practice for three years – a period on which James looks back fondly.

As John settled into the practice, I found a miraculous easing of my life. It was rather wonderful to have an assistant, especially a good one like him. I had always liked him, but when I got a call to a calving heifer at three o'clock in the morning and was able to pass it on to him and turn over and go back to sleep, I could feel the liking deepening into a warm affection.

John eventually marries a local teacher, Heather, and the two live at the Darrowby practice before setting up a practice in Beverley. 'Before he departed,' writes James, 'he paid us the charming compliment of "filling" a bottle with the air from Skeldale House to be released in his new surgery with the object of transferring some of our atmosphere.' The real John Crooks – the only assistant in the Herriot books to retain his real name – did exactly this when he left the practice. He too was a self-assured and immensely likeable man, and he and his wife, Heather (her real name also), remained good friends with Alf and his family. After setting up a practice in Beverley, Yorkshire, he rose to become president of the British Veterinary Association in 1983, but he never forgot the support and invaluable advice he received from Alf and Donald, and looked back on his days in Thirsk as some of the happiest of his life.

A few days after John leaves, the new assistant Calum Buchanan arrives. Tall and sporting a walrus moustache, he walks down the platform of Darrowby station with a giant lurcher by his side. Also draped over his shoulder is a large hairy animal, which James is surprised to discover is his pet badger Marilyn. At Skeldale House, Siegfried looks aghast as the young graduate wolfs down an entire fruit cake; Siegfried pushes James into an empty office: 'What the hell have we got here, James? An assistant with a blasted badger round his neck! And a dog as big as a donkey!'

While clearly an unusual fellow, Calum has glowing references from his university and soon shows how capable he is as a veterinary surgeon, performing a caesarean on a heifer on his very first call-out and then meticulously cleaning his instruments afterwards. Before long, people are requesting the services of 'the vet wi' t'badger'.

'Can I speak to the vet wi' t'badger?'

As I handed the phone to our new assistant, it struck me that this request was becoming common and it did me good to hear it. It meant that Calum was being accepted by the farmers. I didn't mind at all if some of them wanted him instead of me. What I dreaded hearing was 'Don't send that young bugger!' which I had heard about from some of my neighbouring vets when they employed new assistants.

We had been so lucky with John Crooks who had been an outstanding asset to our practice and it seemed to be asking too much of fate for a second top-class man to come along. All the new graduates were better educated than I had been but there

were other reasons why a few didn't make the grade. Some of them just couldn't face the long rough and tumble of general practice with its antisocial hours, others lacked the ability to get on with the clients, and one or two were academically bright but unpractical.

Calum, to my vast relief, seemed to be slotting into the job effortlessly but, just as John and Tristan had been different from each other, so was he from them. Very different. His ever-present badger fascinated people, his tall, walrus-moustached appearance, eager friendliness and unusual outlook on life made him interesting to both farm and small animal clients but, most important of all, he knew his stuff. He was a fine vet.

Calum is also a keen ornithologist and naturalist, and even convinces James to join him on a trip to look for deer, the two rising before dawn and riding two shire horses into the woods as if in some kind of Narnia fantasy. As Siegfried predicts, however, Calum continually adds to his menagerie of pets, soon bringing into the house two Dobermann dogs, Maggie and Anna, alongside a variety of other wild creatures.

It was around the time when Calum's third badger arrived that an uncanny sense of the inevitable began to settle on me.

The new badger was called Bill and Calum didn't say much about his unheralded advent. He did mention it in an off-hand way to me, but prudently failed to take Siegfried into his confidence. I think he realized that there wasn't much point in upsetting my partner further – it seemed only reasonable to assume that Siegfried was getting a little punch-drunk with the assorted creatures milling around and wouldn't even notice.

I was discussing the day's work with my colleagues in the doorway of the dispensary when Siegfried ducked down. 'What the hell was that?' he exclaimed as a large feathery body whizzed past, just missing our heads.

'Oh, it's Calum's owl,' I said.

Siegfried stared at me. 'That owl? I thought it was supposed to be ill.' He turned to our assistant. 'Calum, what's that owl doing here? You brought it in days ago and it looks fit enough now, so take it back where it came from. I like birds, as you know, but not rocketing round in our surgery like bloody eagles – could frighten the life out of the clients.'

The young man nodded. 'Yes . . . yes . . . she's almost recovered. I expect to take her back to the wood very soon.' He pocketed his list of visits and left.

I didn't say anything, but it seemed certain to me that once Calum had got his hands on an owl of his very own he wasn't going to part with it in a hurry. I foresaw some

uncomfortable incidents.

‘And listen to those fox cubs!’ Siegfried went on. ‘What a racket they’re making!’ The yapping, snarling and barking echoed along the passage from the back of the house. There was no doubt they were noisy little things. ‘What does Calum want them in here for?’

‘I’m not sure . . . He did say something, but I can’t quite recall . . .’

‘Well,’ Siegfried grunted, ‘I just hope he’ll remove them as soon as the problem is over.’

Later that day, Siegfried and I were setting a dog’s fractured radius when Calum walked into the operating room. Marilyn, as usual, was on his shoulder, but today she had company; seated comfortably in the crook of the young man’s arms was a little monkey.

Siegfried looked up from his work. He stopped winding the plaster of Paris bandage and his mouth fell open. ‘Oh, my God, no! This is too much! Not a bloody monkey now! It’s like living in a bloody zoo.’

‘Yes,’ replied Calum with a pleased smile. ‘His name is Mortimer.’

‘Never mind his name!’ Siegfried growled. ‘What the hell is he doing here?’

‘Oh, don’t worry, this isn’t a pet – in a way, he’s a patient.’

Siegfried’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you mean – in what way? Is he ill?’

‘Well, not exactly . . . Diana Thurston has asked me to look after him while she’s away on holiday.’

‘And you said yes, of course! No hesitation! That’s just what we need here – bloody monkeys roaming the place on top of everything else!’

Calum looked at him gravely. ‘Well, you know, I was in a difficult position. Colonel Thurston is a very nice man and one of our biggest clients – large farm, hunting horses and umpteen dogs. I couldn’t very well refuse.’

My partner recommenced his winding. The plaster was setting and I could see he wanted time to think. ‘Well, I see your point,’ he said after a few moments. ‘It wouldn’t have looked so good.’ He glanced up at Calum. ‘But it’s definitely just while Diana’s on holiday?’

‘Oh, absolutely, I promise you.’ The young man nodded vigorously. ‘She’s devoted to the little chap and she’ll pick him up as soon as she returns.’

‘Oh, well, I suppose it’ll be all right.’ Siegfried shot a hunted look at the monkey which, open-mouthed, teeth bared and chattering, was apparently laughing at him.

We lifted the sleeping dog from the table and carried him to one of the recovery kennels. My partner seemed indisposed to speak and I didn’t break the silence. I had no desire to discuss Calum’s latest acquisition because I happened to know that Diana Thurston wasn’t just going to Scarborough for a fortnight – she was off to Australia for six months.

I was called out that evening and went to the surgery for extra drugs. As I walked along the passage I could hear a babel of animal sounds from the end of the house and, on opening the door to the back room, I found Calum among his friends. The three badgers were nosing around the food bowls, the owl flapped lazily onto a high shelf. Storm, vast and amiable, waved his tail in welcome, while the Dobermanns regarded me contemplatively. Mortimer the monkey, clearly already under Calum’s spell, leaped from a table into the young man’s arms and grinned at me. In a corner, the fox cubs kept up their strange yapping and growling and I noticed two cages containing a couple of rabbits and a hare – apparently new arrivals.

Looking round the room I realized that Siegfried had been right from the very beginning. The menagerie was now firmly installed. And as I opened the door to leave I wondered just how big it was going to grow.

Calum was modelled on Brian Nettleton, an assistant who joined the Thirsk practice in 1957. He proved to be one of the most capable veterinary surgeons to work there and was immensely popular with the clients. His large stature matched his personality, and he too carried around a badger which always accompanied him when he frequented the local pubs. He had a great affinity with animals of all types and, as featured in Every Living Thing, he would cook up large vats of hideous-smelling tripe for his badgers while owls swooped up and down the corridor and foxes ran around the garden. A lover of nature, he was less bound by routine and frequently disappeared off into the wilds. It was Alf’s son Jim who joined him on the early-morning trips, and Brian always knew exactly where they could see animals in their own habitat. He was also very musical and played the piano accordion; he once bought Alf’s daughter a squeeze box in a jumble sale, teaching her slightly risqué songs thereafter. The ‘vet wi’ t’badger’ – adored by Alf’s family, the local farmers and the regulars in the Drovers’ Arms – was as unforgettable in life as he was on the page.