A voice answered ‘Come in,’ and I opened the door into a huge, stone-flagged kitchen with hams and sides of bacon hanging from hooks in the ceiling. A dark girl in a check blouse and green linen slacks was kneading dough in a bowl. She looked up and smiled.

‘Sorry I couldn’t let you in. I’ve got my hands full.’ She held up her arms, floury-white to the elbow.

‘That’s all right. My name is Herriot. I’ve come to see a calf. It’s lame, I understand.’

‘Yes, we think he’s broken his leg. Probably got his foot in a hole when he was running about. If you don’t mind waiting a minute, I’ll come with you. My father and the men are in the fields. I’m Helen Alderson, by the way.’

She washed and dried her arms and pulled on a pair of short Wellingtons. ‘Take over this bread, will you, Meg,’ she said to an old woman who came through from an inner room. ‘I have to show Mr Herriot the calf.’

Outside, she turned to me and laughed. ‘We’ve got a bit of a walk, I’m afraid. He’s in one of the top buildings. Look, you can just see it up there.’ She pointed to a squat, stone barn, high on the fell-side. I knew all about these top buildings; they were scattered all over the high country and I got a lot of healthy exercise going round them. They were used for storing hay and other things and as shelters for the animals on the hill pastures.

I looked at the girl for a few seconds. ‘Oh, that’s all right, I don’t mind. I don’t mind in the least.’

James has driven to the Alderson farm of Heston Grange to see to a calf. There, he is met by the farmer’s daughter, Helen Alderson, who immediately catches his attention, and he is more than happy to spend a few more minutes in her company as they walk up a hill. In a barn, he finds a trembling calf, which, he confirms, has a fractured radius and ulna. He applies a wet bandage to its leg, waits for it to dry and the calf immediately trots away and happily reunites with his mother. Pleased with his success, the two leave the barn and take in the view below.

We sat down on the warm grass of the hillside, a soft breeze pulled at the heads of the moorland flowers, somewhere a curlew cried. Darrowby and Skeldale House and

veterinary practice seemed a thousand miles away.

‘You’re lucky to live here,’ I said. ‘But I don’t think you need me to tell you that.’

‘No, I love this country. There’s nowhere else quite like it.’ She paused and looked slowly around her. ‘I’m glad it appeals to you too – a lot of people find it too bare and wild. It almost seems to frighten them.’

I laughed. ‘Yes, I know, but as far as I’m concerned I can’t help feeling sorry for all the thousands of vets who don’t work in the Yorkshire Dales.’

I began to talk about my work, then almost without knowing, I was going back over my student days, telling her of the good times, the friends I had made and our hopes and aspirations.

I surprised myself with my flow of talk – I wasn’t much of a chatterbox usually – and I felt I must be boring my companion. But she sat quietly looking over the valley, her arms around her green-clad legs, nodding at times as though she understood. And she laughed in all the right places.

I wondered too, at the silly feeling that I would like to forget all about the rest of the day’s duty and stay up here on this sunny hillside. It came to me that it had been a long time since I had sat down and talked to a girl of my own age. I had almost forgotten what it was like.

I didn’t hurry back down the path and through the scented pine wood but it seemed no time at all before we were walking across the wooden bridge and over the field to the farm.

I turned with my hand on the car door. ‘Well, I’ll see you in a month.’ It sounded like an awful long time.

The girl smiled. ‘Thank you for what you’ve done.’ As I started the engine she waved and went into the house.

‘Helen Alderson?’ Siegfried said later over lunch. ‘Of course I know her. Lovely girl.’

Tristan, across the table, made no comment, but he laid down his knife and fork, raised his eyes reverently to the ceiling and gave a long, low whistle. Then he started to eat again.

Siegfried went on. ‘Oh yes, I know her very well. And I admire her. Her mother died a few years ago and she runs the whole place. Cooks and looks after her father and a younger brother and sister.’ He spooned some mashed potatoes onto his plate. ‘Any

men friends? Oh, half the young bloods in the district are chasing her but she doesn't seem to be going steady with any of them. Choosy sort, I think.'

James's first encounter with Helen has gone well – they can talk easily to each other; she is clearly a very capable young woman and they both count themselves lucky to live and work in the Dales. Back at Skeldale House, James scans the day book regularly, in the hope he can visit the farm again, but is sorry to see the Aldersons seem to have 'lamentably healthy stock'. Instead, he makes do with joining the Darrowby Music Society, having seen Helen going into its meetings. There, with heart thudding, he summons up the courage to ask her out. She agrees and a date is set for Saturday evening.

James is desperate to impress Helen when they meet and he plans to take her to a dinner dance at the grand Reniston Hotel in Brawton. Dressed in a tight-fitting and hopelessly outdated dinner jacket and suit, James turns up at the Alderson farm to pick Helen up. He is shown to the kitchen by Helen's grinning younger brother, who clearly finds the situation funny, as does Helen's little sister, who has a fixed smirk on her face as she sits at the table doing her homework. Mr Alderson beckons James to sit with him by the fire as he reads the Farmer and Stockbreeder.

After about a year I heard footsteps on the stairs, then Helen came into the room. She was wearing a blue dress – the kind, without shoulder straps, that seems to stay up by magic. Her dark hair shone under the single pressure lamp which lit the kitchen, shadowing the soft curves of her neck and shoulders. Over one white arm she held a camel-hair coat.

I felt stunned. She was like a rare jewel in the rough setting of stone flags and whitewashed walls. She gave me her quiet, friendly smile and walked towards me. 'Hello, I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long.'

I muttered something in reply and helped her on with her coat. She went over and kissed her father, who didn't look up but waved his hand vaguely. There was another outburst of giggling from the table. We went out.

In the car I felt unusually tense and for the first mile or two had to depend on some inane remarks about the weather to keep a conversation going. I was beginning to relax when I drove over a little hump-backed bridge into a dip in the road. Then the car suddenly stopped. The engine coughed gently and then we were sitting silent and motionless in the darkness. And there was something else; my feet and ankles were freezing cold. 'My God!' I shouted. 'We've run into a bit of flooded road. The water's right into the car.' I looked round at Helen. 'I'm terribly sorry about this – your feet must be soaked.'

But Helen was laughing. She had her feet tucked up on the seat, her knees under her

chin. ‘Yes, I am a bit wet, but it’s no good sitting about like this. Hadn’t we better start pushing?’

Wading out into the black icy waters was a nightmare but there was no escape. Mercifully it was a little car and between us we managed to push it beyond the flooded patch. Then by torchlight I dried the plugs and got the engine going again.

Helen shivered as we squelched back into the car. ‘I’m afraid I’ll have to go back and change my shoes and stockings. And so will you. There’s another road back through Fensley. You take the first turn on the left.’

Back at the farm, Mr Alderson was still reading the Farmer and Stockbreeder and kept his finger on the list of pig prices while he gave me a baleful glance over his spectacles. When he learned that I had come to borrow a pair of his shoes and socks he threw the paper down in exasperation and rose, groaning, from his chair. He shuffled out of the room and I could hear him muttering to himself as he mounted the stairs.

Helen followed him and I was left alone with the two young children. They studied my sodden trousers with undisguised delight. I had wrung most of the surplus water out of them but the final result was remarkable. Mrs Hall’s knife-edge crease reached to just below the knee, but then there was chaos. The trousers flared out at that point in a crumpled, shapeless mass and as I stood by the fire to dry them a gentle steam rose about me. The children stared at me, wide-eyed and happy. This was a big night for them.

Mr Alderson reappeared at length and dropped some shoes and rough socks at my feet. I pulled on the socks quickly but shrank back when I saw the shoes. They were a pair of dancing slippers from the early days of the century and their cracked patent leather was topped by wide, black silk bows.

I opened my mouth to protest but Mr Alderson had dug himself deep into his chair and had found his place again among the pig prices. I had the feeling that if I asked for another pair of shoes Mr Alderson would attack me with the poker. I put the slippers on.

We had to take a roundabout road to avoid the floods but I kept my foot down and within half an hour we had left the steep sides of the Dale behind us and were heading out on to the rolling plain. I began to feel better. We were making good time and the little car, shuddering and creaking, was going well. I was just thinking that we wouldn’t be all that late when the steering wheel began to drag to one side.

I had a puncture most days and recognized the symptoms immediately. I had become an expert at changing wheels and with a word of apology to Helen was out of the car

like a flash. With my rapid manipulation of the rusty jack and brace the wheel was off within three minutes. The surface of the crumpled tyre was quite smooth except for the lighter, frayed parts where the canvas showed through. Working like a demon, I screwed on the spare, cringing inwardly as I saw that this tyre was in exactly the same condition as the other. I steadfastly refused to think of what I would do if its frail fibres should give up the struggle.

By day, the Reniston dominated Brawton like a vast medieval fortress, bright flags fluttering arrogantly from its four turrets, but tonight it was like a dark cliff with a glowing cavern at street level where the Bentleys discharged their expensive cargoes. I didn't take my vehicle to the front entrance but tucked it away quietly at the back of the car park. A magnificent commissionaire opened the door for us and we trod noiselessly over the rich carpeting of the entrance hall.

We parted there to get rid of our coats, and in the men's cloakroom I scrubbed frantically at my oily hands. It didn't do much good; changing that wheel had given my fingernails a border of deep black which defied ordinary soap and water. And Helen was waiting for me.

I looked up in the mirror at the white-jacketed attendant hovering behind me with a towel. The man, clearly fascinated by my ensemble, was staring down at the wide-bowed pierrot shoes and the rumpled trouser bottoms. As he handed over the towel he smiled broadly as if in gratitude for this little bit of extra colour in his life.

I met Helen in the reception hall and we went over to the desk. 'What time does the dinner dance start?' I asked.

The girl at the desk looked surprised. 'I'm sorry, sir, there's no dance tonight. We only have them once a fortnight.'

I turned to Helen in dismay but she smiled encouragingly. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'I don't really care what we do.'

'We can have dinner, anyway,' I said. I tried to speak cheerfully but a little black cloud seemed to be forming just above my head. Was anything going to go right tonight?

The evening limps on and there's confusion when a waiter asks if they are staying, and James doesn't realize he means overnight at the hotel. When they are finally led to their table, James is convinced the whole evening has been a disaster, is thoroughly miserable and is as hot as hell in his ghastly suit.

Everything was in French and in my numbed state the words were largely meaningless, but somehow I ordered the meal and, as we ate, I tried desperately to keep a conversation going. But long deserts of silence began to stretch between us; it

seemed that only Helen and I were quiet among all the surrounding laughter and chatter.

Worst of all was the little voice which kept telling me that Helen had never really wanted to come out with me anyway. She had done it out of politeness and was getting through a boring evening as best she could.

The journey home was a fitting climax. We stared straight ahead as the headlights picked out the winding road back into the Dales. We made stumbling remarks, then the strained silence took over again. By the time we drew up outside the farm my head had begun to ache.

We shook hands and Helen thanked me for a lovely evening. There was a tremor in her voice and in the moonlight her face was anxious and withdrawn. I said goodnight, got into the car and drove away.

Alf Wight's first date with the real Helen Alderson – Joan Danbury – was similarly disastrous. They weren't on their own, though. A cattle dealer friend of Alf and Brian Sinclair, Malcolm Johnson, knew a few ladies in Thirsk, including Joan. He asked her one day whether she and any friends would like to come along to a dance at a nearby village of Sandhutton. She had never met Alf or Brian but Malcolm assured her they were good fun and Joan agreed that she and two friends would join them. They drove in one of the practice cars, a battered little Ford with holes in the footwell, which promptly ground to a halt in a flooded road, forcing them all to return to 23 Kirkgate once they'd got the car started again. They eventually got to the dance, then returned to the practice house where they chatted further and Brian entertained them all with his usual funny stories and tomfoolery.

Like Helen, Joan, who had dark hair and deep blue eyes, had many admirers but she wasn't a farmer's daughter. She was a secretary at a corn merchant's in Thirsk and her father a government official then working in York. She had grown up in Thirsk, her family moving to the town from the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire when she was eight years old. She had had a few boyfriends before meeting Alf but she instantly took a liking to the young vet and when he asked to see her again, she agreed. While Alf had a solid profession, well revered amongst the rural community, he certainly wasn't as wealthy as some of the richer farmers Joan had dated but she was attracted to Alf, enjoyed his company and they shared a similar sense of humour. Alf had had the odd girlfriend at school and veterinary college, and he and Brian had taken a few young women out to dances locally, but none would captivate him as much as Joan.

In It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet Helen, thankfully, has not been put off by their disastrous first date, although a subsequent cinema trip also proves less than romantic. James is accosted by a farmer, they are ogled at by the local blacksmith's daughter and the cinema shows an ancient Western instead of the film they came to

see. Helen, however, is able to see the funny side of the situation – an important trait when spending time with James. When Gobber Newhouse, sozzled after a session in the pub, plonks himself near them and proceeds to clonk James round the back of the head accidentally, Helen breaks into laughter.

I had never seen a girl laugh like this. It was as though it was something she had wanted to do for a long time. She abandoned herself utterly to it, lying back with her head on the back of the seat, legs stretched out in front of her, arms dangling by her side. She took her time and waited until she had got it all out of her system before she turned to me.

She put her hand on my arm. 'Look,' she said faintly. 'Next time, why don't we just go for a walk?'

While the date hadn't gone exactly to plan, James is at least relieved there will be a next time and they continue to spend more time together. They walk for miles in the hills, Helen occasionally comes on evening calls with James or they go to dances in the village institutes locally. As James puts it: 'There wasn't anything spectacular to do in Darrowby, but there was a complete lack of strain, a feeling of being self-sufficient in a warm existence of our own that made everything meaningful and worthwhile.'

James is clearly besotted and, on the insistence of Siegfried to throw aside his usual cautious ways, he proposes to Helen, who agrees and an early date for a wedding is set. Alf and Joan's wedding, held on a cold winter's morning on 5 November 1941, at St Mary Magdalene church in Thirsk was a similarly small affair. The bride and groom had little money to lavish on a bigger wedding and many couples chose to have more modest nuptials during the wartime years. In addition, neither set of parents attended: Joan's father Horace was ill and there were some difficulties with Alf's parents, who were concerned that Alf was marrying too early, before he was financially secure. Alf's mother Hannah, who ran a successful wedding dress business, had also hoped for a grander wedding and perhaps a daughter-in-law from a better background. Alf, nonetheless, stood firm in his determination to marry Joan and his father was eventually won over by her, but his mother's continuing disapproval would cause Alf uneasiness in later years. Alf had always felt a great deal of affection and respect for his mother – she was very much the driving force in the family, with great ambitions for her son – but their relationship was a complex one.

Five people attended the wedding, including Donald Sinclair who was the best man, exclaiming 'amen' at regular intervals, just as Siegfried does in It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet. They were married by Canon Young, whom Alf remembers shivering with the cold, glad when it was all over and they could head outside into the frosty sunshine.

I can't remember much about the wedding. It was a 'quiet do' and my main recollection is of desiring to get it all over with as soon as possible. I have only one

vivid memory; of Siegfried, just behind me in the church, booming ‘Amen’ at regular intervals throughout the ceremony – the only time I have ever heard a best man do this.

It was an incredible relief when Helen and I were ready to drive away and when we were passing Skeldale House Helen grasped my hand.

‘Look!’ she cried excitedly. ‘Look over there!’

Underneath Siegfried’s brass plate, which always hung slightly askew on the iron railings, was a brand-new one. It was of the modern Bakelite type with a black background and bold white letters which read ‘J. Herriot, MRCVS, Veterinary Surgeon’, and it was screwed very straight and level on the metal.

The newlyweds drive out of Darrowby, James swelling with pride not only to have Helen, his wife, by his side but knowing also that the brass plate means he is now a bona fide partner at the practice alongside Siegfried. After driving and walking in the hills for a few hours, both of them in a bit of a daze, they head to the Wheatsheaf inn where they spend the first night of their honeymoon, after being fed a delicious meal of soup, stew and gooseberry pie and cream. The wedding has come at a busy time for the practice and James has agreed that he and Helen will spend a working honeymoon undertaking tuberculin testing. Helen causes surprise when she wears slacks (trousers) on the morning after their wedding, just as Joan often did, which was still very much a novelty in rural Yorkshire in the late 1930s.

I particularly enjoyed, too, our very first morning when I took Helen to do the test at Allen’s. As I got out of the car I could see Mrs Allen peeping round the curtains in the kitchen window. She was soon out in the yard and her eyes popped when I brought my bride over to her. Helen was one of the pioneers of slacks in the Dales and she was wearing a bright purple pair this morning which would in modern parlance knock your eye out. The farmer’s wife was partly shocked, partly fascinated but she soon found that Helen was of the same stock as herself and within seconds the two women were chattering busily. I judged from Mrs Allen’s vigorous head-nodding and her ever-widening smile that Helen was putting her out of her pain by explaining all the circumstances. It took a long time and finally Mr Allen had to break into the conversation.

‘If we’re goin’ we’ll have to go,’ he said gruffly and we set off to start the second day of the test.

We began on a sunny hillside where a group of young animals had been penned. Jack and Robbie plunged in among the beasts while Mr Allen took off his cap and courteously dusted the top of the wall.

‘Your missus can sit ’ere,’ he said.

I paused as I was about to start measuring. My missus! It was the first time anybody had said that to me. I looked over at Helen as she sat cross-legged on the rough stones, her notebook on her knee, pencil at the ready, and as she pushed back the shining dark hair from her forehead she caught my eye and smiled; and as I smiled back at her I became aware suddenly of the vast, swelling glory of the Dales around us, and of the Dales scent of clover and warm grass, more intoxicating than any wine. And it seemed that my first two years at Darrowby had been leading up to this moment; that the first big step of my life was being completed right here with Helen smiling at me and the memory, fresh in my mind, of my new plate hanging in front of Skeldale House.

I might have stood there indefinitely, in a sort of trance, but Mr Allen cleared his throat in a marked manner and I turned back to the job in hand.

‘Right,’ I said, placing my calipers against the beast’s neck. ‘Number thirty-eight, seven millimetres and circumscribed.’ I called out to Helen, ‘Number thirty-eight, seven, C.’

‘Thirty-eight, seven, C,’ my wife repeated as she bent over her book and started to write.

Alf and Joan Wight also spent the first two days of their honeymoon tuberculin testing, partly to keep up with the busy workload at the practice but also because they had little spare money to spend on a holiday. They nonetheless had a wonderful time, staying at the old Wheatsheaf inn at Caperby, where, Alf remembers, they ate like royalty, the owner Mrs Kilburn and her niece Gladys producing an array of Yorkshire fare, from home-cured ham and Wensleydale cheese to roast beef and Yorkshire puddings.

By the time of Let Sleeping Vets Lie, James has settled into life as a married man, relishing in particular the utter bliss of returning to a warm bed after a bitterly cold farm visit in the middle of the night.

As I crawled into bed and put my arm around Helen it occurred to me, not for the first time, that there are few pleasures in this world to compare with snuggling up to a nice woman when you are half frozen.

There weren’t any electric blankets in the thirties. Which was a pity because nobody needed the things more than country vets. It is surprising how deeply bone-marrow cold a man can get when he is dragged from his bed in the small hours and made to strip off in farm buildings when his metabolism is at a low ebb. Often the worst part was coming back to bed; I often lay exhausted for over an hour, longing for sleep but

kept awake until my icy limbs and feet had thawed out.

But since my marriage such things were but a dark memory. Helen stirred in her sleep – she had got used to her husband leaving her in the night and returning like a blast from the North Pole – and instinctively moved nearer to me. With a sigh of thankfulness I felt the blissful warmth envelop me and almost immediately the events of the last two hours began to recede into unreality.

Alf and Joan spent the early years of married life living on the top two floors of 23 Kirkgate, the basic kitchen on the very top floor, where water had to be carried in jugs from the ground floor, and on the floor below was their bed-sitting room. Despite the primitive conditions, Joan enjoyed looking after the house and became an excellent cook – causing Alf for the first time in his life to put on extra weight, despite the physicality of the job. By July 1942 the happy news came that they were expecting their first child although just a few months later, in November that year, Alf was called up for training in the RAF.

Throughout his time away, Alf and Joan exchanged letters on a daily basis. Clearly anxious about his wife's condition, Alf even experienced bizarre stomach pains as the birth approached, which impelled him to travel to Thirsk to see Joan, without getting authorization to do so.

James is similarly vexed at being separated from Helen and in Vets Might Fly, on his third absence without leave, arrives just after Helen has given birth to their son Jimmy.

I took my first look at my son. Little Jimmy was brick red in colour and his face had a bloated, dissipated look. As I hung over him he twisted his tiny fists under his chin and appeared to be undergoing some mighty internal struggle. His face swelled and darkened as he contorted his features, then from deep among the puffy flesh his eyes fixed me with a baleful glare and he stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth.

'My God!' I exclaimed.

The nurse looked at me, startled. 'What's the matter?'

'Well, he's a funny-looking little thing, isn't he?'

'What!' She stared at me furiously. 'Mr Herriot, how can you say such a thing? He's a beautiful baby!'

I peered into the cot again. Jimmy greeted me with a lopsided leer, turned purple and blew a few bubbles.

‘Are you sure he’s all right?’ I said.

There was a tired giggle from the bed but Nurse Brown was not amused.

‘All right! What exactly do you mean?’ She drew herself up stiffly.

I shuffled my feet. ‘Well, er – is there anything wrong with him?’

I thought she was going to strike me. ‘Anything . . . how dare you! Whatever are you talking about? I’ve never heard such nonsense!’ She turned appealingly towards the bed, but Helen, a weary smile on her face, had closed her eyes.

I drew the enraged little woman to one side. ‘Look, Nurse, have you by chance got any others on the premises?’

‘Any other what?’ she asked icily.

‘Babies – new babies. I want to compare Jimmy with another one.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Compare him! Mr Herriot, I’m not going to listen to you any longer – I’ve lost patience with you!’

‘I’m asking you, Nurse,’ I repeated. ‘Have you any more around?’

There was a long pause as she looked at me as though I was something new and incredible. ‘Well – there’s Mrs Dewburn in the next room. Little Sidney was born about the same time as Jimmy.’

‘Can I have a look at him?’ I gazed at her appealingly.

She hesitated, then a pitying smile crept over her face. ‘Oh you . . . you . . . just a minute, then.’

She went into the other room and I heard a mumble of voices. She reappeared and beckoned to me.

Mrs Dewburn was the butcher’s wife and I knew her well. The face on the pillow was hot and tired like Helen’s.

‘Eee, Mr Herriot, I didn’t expect to see you. I thought you were in the army.’

‘RAF, actually, Mrs Dewburn. I’m on – er – leave at the moment.’

I looked in the cot. Sidney was dark red and bloated, too, and he, also, seemed to be

wrestling with himself. The inner battle showed in a series of grotesque facial contortions culminating in a toothless snarl.

I stepped back involuntarily. ‘What a beautiful child,’ I said.

‘Yes, isn’t he lovely,’ said his mother fondly.

‘He is indeed, gorgeous.’ I took another disbelieving glance into the cot. ‘Well, thank you, very much, Mrs Dewburn. It was kind of you to let me see him.’

‘Not at all, Mr Herriot, it’s nice of you to take an interest.’ Outside the door I took a long breath and wiped my brow. The relief was tremendous. Sidney was even funnier than Jimmy.

When I returned to Helen’s room Nurse Brown was sitting on the bed and the two women were clearly laughing at me. And of course, looking back, I must have appeared silly. Sidney Dewburn and my son are now two big, strong, remarkably good-looking young men, so my fears were groundless.

The little nurse looked at me quizzically. I think she had forgiven me.

‘I suppose you think all your calves and foals are beautiful right from the moment they are born?’

‘Well yes,’ I replied. ‘I have to admit it – I think they are.’

In reality, Alf was similarly shocked to see his son for the first time when he visited Joan at the Sunnyside Nursing Home in Thirsk. It was Nurse Bell, not Nurse Brown, who had to show him another little baby, just to calm his fears about the appearance of little Jimmy, only then to waft the new father out of his wife’s room. Joan and Jimmy stayed at Sunnyside for fourteen days – which was the norm in those days for women who had given birth. Confined to bed, Joan always maintained this made for the best holiday of her life!

In The Lord God Made Them All Jimmy is now four and regularly joins his father on his rounds. James clearly loves spending time with his young son, and Jimmy is an enthusiastic helper, showing early on his interest in pursuing his father’s profession.

‘Hello! Hello!’ I bellowed.

‘Hello! Hello!’ little Jimmy piped just behind me.

I turned and looked at my son. He was four years old now and had been coming on my rounds with me for over a year. It was clear that he considered himself a veteran of

the farmyards, an old hand versed in all aspects of agricultural lore.

This shouting was a common habit of mine. When a vet arrived on a farm it was often surprisingly difficult to find the farmer. He might be a dot on a tractor half a mile across the fields, on rare occasions he might be in the house, but I always hoped to find him among the buildings and relied on a few brisk shouts to locate him.

Certain farms in our practice were for no apparent reason distinctive in that you could never find anybody around. The house door would be locked and we would scour the barns, cow houses and fold yards while our cries echoed back at us from the unheeding walls. Siegfried and I used to call them the ‘no-finding’ places and they were responsible for a lot of wasted time.

Jimmy had caught on to the problem quite early and there was no doubt he enjoyed the opportunity to exercise his lungs a bit. I watched him now as he strutted importantly over the cobbles, giving tongue every few seconds. He was also making an unnecessary amount of noise by clattering on the rough stones with his new boots.

Those boots were his pride, the final recognition of his status as veterinary assistant. When I first began to take him round with me his first reaction was the simple joy of a child at being able to see animals of all kinds, particularly the young ones – the lambs, foals, piglets, calves – and the thrill of discovery when he came upon a huddle of kittens in the straw or found a bitch with pups in a loose box.

Before long, however, he began to enlarge his horizons. He wanted to get into the action. The contents of my car boot were soon as familiar to him as his toy box at home, and he delighted in handing out the tins of stomach powder, the electuaries and red blisters, the white lotion and the still revered long cartons of Universal Cattle Medicine. Finally he began to forestall me by rushing back to the car for calcium and flutter valve as soon as he saw a recumbent cow. He had become a diagnostician as well.

I think the thing he enjoyed most was accompanying me on an evening call, if Helen would allow him to postpone his bedtime. He was in heaven driving into the country in the darkness, training my torch on a cow’s teat while I stitched it.

The farmers were kind, as they always are with young people. Even the most uncommunicative would grunt, ‘Ah see you’ve got t’apprentice with ye,’ as we got out of the car.

During the long drives to farms, little Jimmy also takes the opportunity to assail his father with a constant barrage of questions, along the lines of ‘What is the fastest train – the Blue Peter or the Flying Scotsman?’ which James does his best to answer. In reality, Jim Wight also joined his father Alf on farm visits from an early age and proved

equally curious and also coveted the thick hobnailed boots that farmers wore. By opening gates and carrying equipment, Jim was a useful helper and the time he spent with his father driving around on rounds from the age of two until he started secondary school undoubtedly resulted in him also becoming a veterinary surgeon. Alf was pleased he showed an early interest in veterinary practice – it was after all a way of life that fascinated him – and he was always encouraging and patient with his son. However, he never pressured Jim into following his career and in fact always warned him that he'd never be a wealthy man as a rural vet and advised him only to pursue the profession if he was really sure it was what he wanted.

Jimmy could be a little mischievous at times and such is the case one afternoon in The Lord God Made Them All when James is in the consulting room looking at Mr Garrett's sheepdog. Jim Wight well remembers this incident, which occurred when he was around six or seven. Jim was never a very naughty child but he did get into the occasional scrape, often when ranging around with his gang of friends, scrumping for apples or swimming in rivers. But in this story, he is on his own – just as his father is preparing to inject an anaesthetic, he glimpses his son up to no good in the garden.

It was when I was filling the syringe that a knee came into view at the corner of the window. I felt a pang of annoyance. Jimmy surely couldn't be climbing up the wisteria. It was dangerous and I had expressly forbidden it. The branches of the beautiful creeper curled all over the back of the house and though they were as thick as a man's leg near ground level they became quite slender as they made their way up past the bathroom window to the tiles of the roof.

James, nonetheless, must focus on what he is doing – finding and removing a thorn or some kind of foreign body from the pad of the sheepdog's foot, with the use of a scalpel. At first he thinks he's probably mistaken about Jimmy but then realizes the little blighter is on the wisteria but there's nothing he can do other than give him a quick glare.

I was drawing the scalpel across at right angles to my first cut when from the corner of my eye I spotted two feet dangling just below the top of the window. I tried to concentrate on my job but the feet swung and kicked repeatedly, obviously for my benefit. At last they disappeared, which could only mean that their owner was ascending to the dangerous regions. I dug down a little deeper and swabbed with cotton wool.

Ah yes, I could see something now, but it was very deep, probably the tip of a thorn which had broken off well below the surface. I felt the thrill of the hunter as I reached for forceps and just then the head showed itself again, upside down this time.

My God, he was hanging by his feet from the branches and the face was positively leering. In deference to my client I had been trying to ignore the by-play from outside

but this was too much. I leaped at the glass and shook my fist violently. My fury must have startled the performer because the face vanished instantly and I could hear faint sounds of feet scrambling upwards.

That was not much comfort either. Those top branches might not support a boy's weight. I forced myself back to my task.

'Sorry, Mr Garrett,' I said. 'Will you hold the leg up again, please.'

He replied with a thin smile and I pushed my forceps into the depths. They grated on something hard. I gripped, pulled gently, and, oh lovely, lovely, out came the pointed, glistening head of a thorn. I had done it.

It was one of the tiny triumphs which lighten vets' lives and I was beaming at my client and patting his dog's head when I heard the crack from above. It was followed by a long howl of terror then a small form hurtled past the window and thudded with horrid force into the garden.

I threw down the forceps and shot out of the room, along the passage and through the side door into the garden. Jimmy was already sitting up among the wallflowers and I was too relieved to be angry.

'Have you hurt yourself?' I gasped, and he shook his head.

I lifted him to his feet and he seemed to be able to stand all right. I felt him over carefully. There appeared to be no damage.

I led him back into the house. 'Go along and see Mummy,' I said, and returned to the consulting room.

I must have been deathly pale when I entered because Mr Garrett looked startled. 'Is he all right?' he asked.

'Yes, yes, I think so. But I do apologize for rushing out like that. It was really too bad of me to . . .'

Mr Garrett laid his hand on my shoulder. 'Say no more, Mr Herriot, I have children of my own.' And then he spoke the words which have become engraven on my heart. 'You need nerves of steel to be a parent.'

On 9 May 1947, Alf and Joan's second child, Rosie, was born, much to their delight. The afternoon before, Alf and Joan had been at the cinema in Harrogate where Joan began to experience the early pains of labour. They headed back to Thirsk and by 6 a.m. the following morning, Joan announced Rosie was definitely on her way. 'Shaking

with panic', as Alf put it, he whisked her into the Sunnyside Nursing Home and after a few more hours of 'floor pacing and repeated attempts to read the newspaper upside down' Dr Addison phoned to announce, 'A sister for Jimmy!' In The Lord God Made Them All, James muses on the blessing of a new life while walking his dog Sam.

After I had seen my patient, I took a walk on the high tops along a favourite path of beaten earth on the hill's edge with Sam trotting at my heels. I looked away over the rolling patchwork of the plain sleeping in the sun's haze and at the young bracken on the hillside springing straight and green from last year's dead brown stalks. Everywhere new life was calling out its exultant message, and it was so apt with my new little daughter lying down there in Darrowby.

We had decided to call her Rosemary. It is such a pretty name and I still love it, but it didn't last long. It became Rosie at a very early stage and, though I did make one or two ineffectual stands, it has remained so to this day. She is now Doctor Rosie in our community.

Rosie, like Jimmy before, also delighted in accompanying her father on farm visits and became extremely adept in helping out Alf was similarly happy to take little Rosie on his rounds, experiencing for the second time, as James writes, 'the intense pleasure of showing them the farm animals and seeing their growing wonder at the things of the countryside; the childish chatter which never palled, the fun and the laughter which lightened my days'. Rosie and Jimmy both learn that there can be dangers involved in veterinary work; Jim becomes wary of sows, whereas Rosie is lucky she escapes unharmed when a large cow comes careering towards her.

I leaned from the pen. 'Rosie, will you bring me my scissors, the cotton wool and that bottle of peroxide.'

The farmer watched wonderingly as the tiny figure trotted to the car and came back with the three things. 'By gaw, t'little lass knows 'er way around.'

'Oh yes,' I said, smiling. 'I'm not saying she knows where everything is in the car, but she's an expert on the things I use regularly.'

Rosie handed me my requirements and I reached over the door. Then she retreated to her place at the end of the passage.

I began my work on the abscess. Since the tissue was necrotic the cow couldn't feel anything as I snipped and swabbed, but that didn't stop the hind leg from pistoning out every few seconds. Some animals cannot tolerate any kind of interference and this was one of them.

I finished at last with a nice wide clean area onto which I trickled the hydrogen

peroxide. I had a lot of faith in this old remedy as a penetrative antiseptic when there was a lot of pus about, and I watched contentedly as it bubbled on the skin surface. The cow, however, did not seem to enjoy the sensation because she made a sudden leap into the air, tore the rope from the farmer's hands, brushed me to one side and made for the door.

The door was closed but it was a flimsy thing and she went straight through it with a splintering crash. As the hairy black monster shot into the passage I desperately willed her to turn left but to my horror she went right and after a wild scraping of her feet on the cobbles began to thunder down towards the dead end where my little daughter was standing.

It was one of the worst moments of my life. As I dashed towards the broken door I heard a small voice say 'Mama'. There was no scream of terror, just that one quiet word. When I left the pen Rosie was standing with her back against the end wall of the passage and the cow was stationary, looking at her from a distance of two feet.

The animal turned when she heard my footsteps then whipped round in a tight circle and galloped past me into the yard.

I was shaking when I lifted Rosie into my arms. She could easily have been killed and a jumble of thoughts whirled in my brain. Why had she said 'Mama'? I had never heard her use the word before – she always called Helen 'Mummy' or 'Mum'. Why had she been apparently unafraid? I didn't know the answers. All I felt was an overwhelming thankfulness. To this day I feel the same whenever I see that passage.

The incident with Rosie was a real one but, at the age of three, she was too small to remember it but well remembers her father telling it to her and the family in later years. When driving around with her father, Rosie loved also to sing in the back of the car and if Jim was there, he would whistle, harmonizing with his sister's tunes. And just as Jimmy liked to quiz his father with a myriad of random questions, Rosie liked to have her father quiz her on her interest in wildflowers and the natural world, no doubt inspired by the hedgerows and wild beauty of North Yorkshire that they sped past.

Rosie solemnly opened the three gates on the way back, then she looked up at me expectantly. I knew what it was – she wanted to play one of her games. She loved being quizzed just as Jimmy had loved to quiz me.

I took my cue and began. 'Give me the names of six blue flowers.'

She coloured quickly in satisfaction because of course she knew. 'Field scabious, harebell, forget-me-not, bluebell, speedwell, meadow cranesbill.'

'Clever girl,' I said. 'Now let's see – how about the names of six birds?'

Again the blush and the quick reply. ‘Magpie, curlew, thrush, plover, yellowhammer, rook.’

‘Very good indeed. Now name me six red flowers.’ And so it went on, day after day, with infinite variations. I only half realized at the time how lucky I was. I had a demanding, round-the-clock job and yet I had the company of my children at the same time. So many men work so hard to keep the home going that they lose touch with the families who are at the heart of it, but it never happened to me.

Both Jimmy and Rosie, until they went to school, spent most of their time with me round the farms. With Rosie, as her schooldays approached, her attitude, always solicitous, became distinctly maternal. She really couldn’t see how I was going to get by without her and by the time she was five she was definitely worried.

‘Daddy,’ she would say seriously. ‘How are you going to manage when I’m at school? All those gates to open and having to get everything out of the boot by yourself. It’s going to be awful for you.’

I used to try to reassure her, patting her head as she looked up at me in the car. ‘I know, Rosie, I know. I’m going to miss you, but I’ll get along somehow.’

Her response was always the same. A relieved smile and then the comforting words. ‘But never mind, Daddy, I’ll be with you every Saturday and Sunday. You’ll be all right then.’

Having seen Alf at work and the pleasure he took from veterinary practice it’s no surprise that both children wanted to be veterinary surgeons when they grew up. Alf had no qualms about Jim following in his footsteps but he had concerns about Rosie doing the same, as he writes in Every Living Thing:

Our practice was ninety per cent large animal work and although I loved the work I was always being kicked, knocked about and splashed with various kinds of filth. With all its charms and rewards it was a dirty and often dangerous job. On several occasions, I was called to help out in neighbouring practices where the vet had sustained a broken limb, and I had myself been lame for weeks when a huge carthorse whacked my thigh with his iron-shod hoof.

As a result Alf talked Rosie out of veterinary practice but during the writing of Every Living Thing (published in 1992) he wonders whether he did the right thing, considering the high percentage of women who now do the job. He acknowledges that much has changed in the profession, not least that small animals have now taken up more than half of vets’ work and there’s far less wrestling with large farm animals. Alf instead persuaded Rosie to become a doctor of humans, a career in which she

flourished, studying medicine at the University of Cambridge before working as a partner in a successful GP practice in Thirsk.

In The Lord God Made Them All, James and six-year-old Rosie are visiting a farm, where they chat to Grandma Clarke, a local woman in her late eighties who had lived a long life of toil but from whom goodness seems to flow.

‘How old are ye now, Rosie?’ she asked as she presented the chocolate.

‘Thank you, I’m six,’ my daughter replied.

Grandma looked down at the smiling face, at the sturdy tanned legs in their blue shorts and sandals. ‘Well, you’re a grand little lass.’ For a moment she rested her work-roughened hand against the little girl’s cheek, then she returned to her chair. They didn’t make much of a fuss, those old Yorkshire folk, but to me the gesture was like a benediction.

The old lady picked up her knitting again. ‘And how’s that lad o’ yours. How’s Jimmy?’

‘Oh, he’s fine, thank you. Ten years old now. He’s out with some of his pals this morning.’

‘Ten, eh? Ten and six . . . ten and six . . .’ For a few seconds her thoughts seemed far away as she plied her needles, then she looked at me again. ‘Maybe ye don’t know it, Mr Herriot, but this is the best time of your life.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Aye, there’s no doubt about it. When your children are young and growin’ up around ye – that’s when it’s best. It’s the same for everybody, only a lot o’ folk don’t know it and a lot find out when it’s too late. It doesn’t last long, you know.’

‘I believe I’ve always realized that, Mrs Clarke, without thinking about it very much.’

‘Reckon you have, young man.’ She gave me a sideways smile. ‘You allus seem to have one or t’other of your bairns with you on your calls.’

As I drove away from the farm the old lady’s words stayed in my mind. They are still in my mind, all these years later, when Helen and I are soon to celebrate our Ruby Wedding of forty years of marriage. Life has been good to us and is still good to us. We are lucky – we have had so many good times – but I think we both agree that Grandma Clarke was right about the very best time of all.