‘Hello, ’ello, ’ello! Who’s this we’ve got then? New chap eh? Now we’re going to learn summat!’ He still had his hands inside his braces and was grinning wider than ever.

‘My name is Herriot,’ I said.

‘Is it now?’ Phin cocked his head and surveyed me, then he turned to three young men standing by. ‘Hasn’t he a nice smile, lads? He’s a real Happy Harry!’

He turned and began to lead the way across the yard. ‘Come on, then, and we’ll see what you’re made of. I ’ope you know a bit about calves because I’ve got some here that are right dowly.’

Phin Calvert, owner of a fine dairy herd in the Dales, extends a typical greeting to the young James Herriot. It’s clear that James must prove himself to the hard-working farmers around Darrowby, especially as Siegfried before him has already earned their respect. While Phin Calvert is suspicious of James and pokes a little fun at him, other farmers – the gruff, silent types – are less talkative on first meeting and will only thaw a little when they know they can trust the young vet with their animals.

Early on in If Only They Could Talk, James sums up how daunting it is to turn up to a case and to witness the disappointment on a farmer’s face when he realizes James, and not the much-revered Siegfried, will be attending to their animals. Despite this, James soon becomes familiar with the many qualities and quirks of the Dales people, many of whom are unfailingly generous with their hospitality, even to James the ‘furriner’.

But I had to admit they were fair. I got no effusive welcomes and when I started to tell them what I thought about the case they listened with open scepticism, but I found that if I got my jacket off and really worked at the job they began to thaw a little. And they were hospitable. Even though they were disappointed at having me they asked me into their homes. ‘Come in and have a bit o’ dinner,’ was a phrase I heard nearly every day. Sometimes I was glad to accept and I ate some memorable meals with them.

Often, too, they would slip half a dozen eggs or a pound of butter into the car as I was leaving. This hospitality was traditional in the Dales and I knew they would probably do the same for any visitor, but it showed the core of friendliness which lay under the often unsmiling surface of these people and it helped.

I was beginning to learn about the farmers and what I found I liked. They had a toughness and a philosophical attitude which was new to me. Misfortunes which would make the city dweller want to bang his head against a wall were shrugged off with ‘Aye, well, these things happen.’

Alfred Wight was similarly under the microscope when he first joined the Thirsk practice working alongside Donald Sinclair. The arrival of a new vet does not go unnoticed in rural practice and Alf certainly felt he was being watched and assessed by local farmers. Not only were many of them inscrutable in their manner – making it difficult for the young vet to understand what they were thinking – but they also spoke in a broad Yorkshire dialect using words that would have been entirely alien to the Glaswegian vet. Understanding what a farmer meant by a cow being a bit ‘dowly’ was just the start of the process.

Gradually, however, Alf got to grips with this new world and language and soon became accepted and well liked in the community. Just as the locals were interested in him, Alf was similarly fascinated by the array of people he met – and would write about them with great affection in his books. Alf also delighted in their humour and peculiar way with words, as Dales farmer Dick Rudd illustrates in It Shouldn’t Happen to a Vet.

Dick believed in veterinary advice for everything so I was a frequent visitor at Birch Tree Farm. After every visit there was an unvarying ritual; I was asked into the house for a cup of tea and the whole family downed tools and sat down to watch me drink it. On weekdays the eldest girl was out at work and the boys were at school but on Sundays the ceremony reached its full splendour with myself sipping the tea and all nine Rudds sitting around in what I can only call an admiring circle. My every remark was greeted with nods and smiles all round. There is no doubt it was good for my ego to have an entire family literally hanging on my words, but at the same time it made me feel curiously humble.

I suppose it was because of Dick’s character. Not that he was unique in any way – there were thousands of small farmers just like him – but he seemed to embody the best qualities of the Dalesman: the indestructibility, the tough philosophy, the unthinking generosity and hospitality. And there were the things that were Dick’s own: the integrity which could be read always in his steady eyes and the humour which was never very far away. Dick was no wit but he was always trying to say ordinary things in a funny way. If I asked him to get hold of a cow’s nose for me he would say solemnly ‘Ah’ll endeavour to do so,’ or I remember when I was trying to lift a square of plywood which was penning a calf in a corner he said, ‘Just a minute till ah raise portcullis.’ When he broke into a smile a kind of radiance flooded his pinched features.

The resilience of the Dales people was not just confined to the men: Mrs Dalby in Let Sleeping Vets Lie showed just how tough a widow could be under the most difficult of circumstances. Having recently lost her husband Billy Dalby to cancer, she is left with

three young sons and a farm to run, which neighbouring farmers assume will fail without a man to run it. However, they underestimate Mrs Dalby's strength of character which is soon tested when she almost loses her entire herd of cattle to husk (also known as lungworm or parasitic bronchitis, a disease caused by the presence of parasites in the lungs. Vaccines now protect animals from the disease). In the face of near disaster, Mrs Dalby battles on and twenty years later, as James muses in the same book, she and the family are thriving, even buying a neighbouring farm and land. Throughout it all, she never complains of the struggle and grinding toil and is unfailingly hospitable to James.

The general opinion was that Mrs Dalby should sell up and get out. You needed a man to run this place and anyway Prospect House was a bad farm. Neighbouring farmers would stick out their lower lips and shake their heads when they looked at the boggy pastures on the low side of the house with the tufts of spiky grass sticking from the sour soil or at the rocky outcrops and scattered stones on the hillside fields. No, it was a poor place and a woman would never make a go of it.

Everybody thought the same thing except Mrs Dalby herself. There wasn't much of her, in fact she must have been one of the smallest women I have ever seen – around five feet high – but there was a core of steel in her. She had her own mind and her own way of doing things.

I remember when Billy was still alive I had been injecting some sheep up there and Mrs Dalby called me into the house.

'You'll have a cup of tea, Mr Herriot?' She said it in a gracious way, not casually, her head slightly on one side and a dignified little smile on her face.

And when I went into the kitchen I knew what I would find; the inevitable tray. It was always a tray with Mrs Dalby. The hospitable Dales people were continually asking me in for some kind of refreshment – a 'bit o' dinner' perhaps, but if it wasn't midday there was usually a mug of tea and a scone or a hunk of thick-crusted apple pie – but Mrs Dalby invariably set out a special tray. And there it was today with a clean cloth and the best china cup and saucer and side plates with sliced buttered scones and iced cakes and malt bread and biscuits. It was on its own table away from the big kitchen table.

'Do sit down, Mr Herriot,' she said in her precise manner. 'I hope that tea isn't too strong for you.'

Her speech was what the farmers would call 'very proper' but it went with her personality which to me embodied a determination to do everything as correctly as possible.

‘Looks perfect to me, Mrs Dalby.’ I sat down feeling somewhat exposed in the middle of the kitchen with Billy smiling comfortably from an old armchair by the fire and his wife standing by my side.

She never sat down with us but stood there, very erect, hands clasped in front of her, head inclined, ceremoniously attending to my every wish. ‘Let me fill your cup, Mr Herriot,’ or ‘Won’t you try some of this custard tart?’

More often than not, farmers and the local people of the Dales are welcoming to James and Siegfried, knowing that they depend on the two vets for the welfare of their animals. Small farmers Mr and Mrs Horner express their gratitude, like Mrs Dalby and many like her, in the form of food. After a difficult but successful calving, Mr Horner ushers James into the kitchen where he is presented with a treat much prized by the locals, fatty bacon, along with a pungent pickle known as piccalilli. James, however, has a pathological loathing of fat and combined with a powerfully strong piccalilli, the meal becomes something of a trial for him.

‘Will you sit down along o’ my husband and have a bit o’ breakfast?’ she asked.

There is nothing like an early calving to whet the appetite and I nodded readily. ‘That’s very kind of you, I’d love to.’

It is always a good feeling after a successful delivery and I sighed contentedly as I sank into a chair and watched the old lady set out bread, butter and jam in front of me. I sipped my tea and as I exchanged a word with the farmer I didn’t see what she was doing next. Then my toes curled into a tight ball as I found two huge slices of pure white fat lying on my plate.

Shrinking back in my seat I saw Mrs Horner sawing at a great hunk of cold boiled bacon. But it wasn’t ordinary bacon, it was one hundred per cent fat without a strip of lean anywhere. Even in my shocked state I could see it was a work of art; cooked to a turn, beautifully encrusted with golden crumbs and resting on a spotless serving dish . . . but fat.

She dropped two similar slices on her husband’s plate and looked at me expectantly.

My position was desperate. I could not possibly offend this sweet old person but on the other hand I knew beyond all doubt that there was no way I could eat what lay in front of me. Maybe I could have managed a tiny piece if it had been hot and fried crisp, but cold, boiled and clammy . . . never. And there was an enormous quantity; two slices about six inches by four and at least half an inch thick with the golden border of crumbs down one side. The thing was impossible.

Mrs Horner sat down opposite me. She was wearing a flowered mob cap over her

white hair and for a moment she reached out, bent her head to one side and turned the dish with the slab of bacon a little to the left to show it off better. Then she turned to me and smiled. It was a kind, proud smile.

There have been times in my life when, confronted by black and hopeless circumstances, I have discovered in myself undreamed-of resources of courage and resolution. I took a deep breath, seized knife and fork and made a bold incision in one of the slices, but as I began to transport the greasy white segment to my mouth I began to shudder and my hand stayed frozen in space. It was at that moment I spotted the jar of piccalilli.

Feverishly I scooped a mound of it onto my plate. It seemed to contain just about everything; onions, apples, cucumber and other assorted vegetables jostling each other in a powerful mustard-vinegar sauce. It was the work of a moment to smother my loaded fork with the mass, then I popped it into my mouth, gave a couple of quick chews and swallowed. It was a start and I hadn't tasted a thing except the piccalilli.

'Nice bit of bacon,' Mr Horner murmured.

'Delicious!' I replied, munching desperately at the second forkful. 'Absolutely delicious!'

'And you like ma piccalilli too!' The old lady beamed at me. 'Ah can tell by the way you're slappin' it on!' She gave a peal of delighted laughter.

'Yes indeed.' I looked at her with streaming eyes. 'Some of the best I've ever tasted.'

Looking back, I realize it was one of the bravest things I have ever done. I stuck to my task unwaveringly, dipping again and again into the jar, keeping my mind a blank, refusing grimly to think of the horrible thing that was happening to me. There was only one bad moment, when the piccalilli, which packed a tremendous punch and was never meant to be consumed in large mouthfuls, completely took my breath away and I went into a long coughing spasm. But at last I came to the end. A final heroic crunch and swallow, a long gulp at my tea and the plate was empty. The thing was accomplished.

And there was no doubt it had been worth it. I had been a tremendous success with the old folks. Mr Horner slapped my shoulder.

'By gaw, it's good to see a young feller enjoyin' his food! When I were a lad I used to put it away sharpish, like that, but ah can't do it now.' Chuckling to himself, he continued with his breakfast.

His wife showed me the door. 'Aye, it was a real compliment to me.' She looked at the

table and giggled. ‘You’ve nearly finished the jar!’

‘Yes, I’m sorry, Mrs Horner,’ I said, smiling through my tears and trying to ignore the churning in my stomach. ‘But I just couldn’t resist it.’

Contrary to my expectations I didn’t drop down dead soon afterwards but for a week I was oppressed by a feeling of nausea which I am prepared to believe was purely psychosomatic.

At any rate, since that little episode I have never knowingly eaten fat again. My hatred was transformed into something like an obsession from then on.

And I haven’t been all that crazy about piccalilli either.

While generosity abounds in the Dales, so too does thriftiness. Farmers are often careful with their money and those unable or reluctant to part with their cash resent having to pay vet bills, only calling a veterinary surgeon in as a very last resort when all other home-spun remedies have failed. The odd farmer also delights in crafty schemes to save or make themselves a bit of money – as is the case with Mr Cranford and others like him who blatantly bend the rules when it comes to insurance claims.

Cranford was a hard man, a man who had cast his life in a mould of iron austerity. A sharp bargainer, a win-at-all-cost character and, in a region where thrift was general, he was noted for meanness. He farmed some of the best land in the lower Dale, his shorthorns won prizes regularly at the shows but he was nobody’s friend. Mr Bateson, his neighbour to the north, summed it up: ‘That feller ’ud skin a flea for its hide.’ Mr Dickon, his neighbour to the south, put it differently: ‘If he gets haud on a pound note, by gaw it’s a prisoner.’

This morning’s meeting had had its origin the previous day. A phone call mid-afternoon from Mr Cranford. ‘I’ve had a cow struck by lightning. She’s laid dead in the field.’

I was surprised. ‘Lightning? Are you sure? We haven’t had a storm today.’

‘Maybe you haven’t, but we have ’ere.’

‘Mmm, all right, I’ll come and have a look at her.’

Driving to the farm, I couldn’t work up much enthusiasm for the impending interview. This lightning business could be a bit of a headache. All farmers were insured against lightning stroke – it was usually part of their fire policy – and after a severe thunderstorm it was common enough for the vets’ phones to start ringing with requests to examine dead beasts.

The insurance companies were reasonable about it. If they received a certificate from the vet that he believed lightning to be the cause of death they would usually pay up without fuss.

In cases of doubt they would ask for a post-mortem or a second opinion from another practitioner. The difficulty was that there are no diagnostic post-mortem features to go on; occasionally a bruising of the tissues under the skin, but very little else. The happiest situation was when the beast was found with the tell-tale scorch marks running from an ear down the leg to earth into the ground. Often the animal would be found under a tree which itself had obviously been blasted and torn by lightning. Diagnosis was easy then.

Ninety-nine per cent of the farmers were looking only for a square deal and if their vet found some other clear cause of death they would accept his verdict philosophically. But the odd one could be very difficult.

I had heard Siegfried tell of one old chap who had called him out to verify a lightning death. The long scorch marks on the carcass were absolutely classic and Siegfried, viewing them, had been almost lyrical. ‘Beautiful, Charlie, beautiful, I’ve never seen more typical marks. But there’s just one thing.’ He put an arm round the old man’s shoulder. ‘What a great pity you let the candle grease fall on the skin.’

The old man looked closer and thumped a fist into his palm. ‘Dang it, you’re right, maister! Ah’ve mucked t’job up. And ah took pains ower it an’ all – been on for dang near an hour.’ He walked away muttering. He showed no embarrassment, only disgust at his own technological shortcomings.

While Mr Cranford grows increasingly frustrated with James when he refuses to collude with the farmer’s bogus insurance claims, there is the odd family who positively despise James, Siegfried and any vet. Principal of these are the Sidlows, who are unwavering in their contempt of vets. In their view, veterinary surgeons are parasites of the agricultural community who know nothing about animals and are out to rob farmers of their hard-earned money. This viewpoint is only confirmed when in Every Living Thing James has the audacity to turn up in a new-looking car.

‘You call yourself a vet, but you’re nowt but a robber!’

Mrs Sidlow, her fierce little dark eyes crackling with fury, spat out the words and as I looked at her, taking in the lank, black hair framing the haggard face with its pointed chin, I thought, not for the first time, how very much she resembled a witch. It was easy to imagine her throwing a leg over a broomstick and zooming off for a quick flip across the moon.

‘All t’country’s talkin’ about you and your big bills,’ she continued. ‘I don’t know how you get away with it, it’s daylight robbery – robbin’ the poor farmers and then you come out here bold as brass in your flash car.’

That was what had started it. Since my old vehicle was dropping to bits I had splashed out on a second-hand Austin 10. It had done twenty thousand miles but had been well maintained and looked like new with its black bodywork shining in the sun and the very sight of it had sparked off Mrs Sidlow.

The purchase of a new car was invariably greeted with a bit of leg-pulling by most of the farmers. ‘Job must be payin’ well,’ they would say with a grin. But it was all friendly, with never a hint of the venom which seemed to be part of the Sidlow menage.

The Sidlows hated vets. Not just me, but all of them and that was quite a few because they had tried every practice for miles around and had found them all wanting. The trouble was that Mr Sidlow himself was quite simply the only man in the district who knew anything about doctoring sick animals – his wife and all his grown-up family knew this as an article of faith and whenever illness struck any of his cattle, it was natural that father took over. It was only when he had exhausted his supply of secret remedies that the vet was called in. I personally had seen only dying animals on that farm and had been unable to bring them back to life, so the Sidlows were invariably confirmed in their opinion of me along with the rest of my profession.

Today I had been viewing with the old feeling of hopelessness an emaciated little beast huddled in a dark corner of the fold yard taking its last few breaths after a week of pneumonia while the family stood around breathing hostility, shooting the usual side glances at me from their glowering faces. I had been trailing wearily back to my car on the way out when Mrs Sidlow had spotted me from the kitchen window and catapulted into the yard.

‘Aye, it’s awright for you,’ she went on. ‘We ’ave to work hard to make a livin’ on this spot and then such as you come and take our money away from us without doin’ anythin’ for it. Ah know what it is, your idea is to get rich quick!’

Only my long training that the customer is always right stopped me from barking back. Instead I forced a smile.

‘Mrs Sidlow,’ I said, ‘I assure you that I’m anything but rich. In fact, if you could see my bank balance, you would see what I mean.’

‘You’re tellin’ me you haven’t much money?’

‘That’s right.’

She waved towards the Austin and gave me another searing glare. ‘So this fancy car’s just a lot o’ show on nowt!’

I had no answer. She had me both ways – either I was a fat cat or a stuck-up poseur.

As I drove away up the rising road I looked back at the farm with its substantial house and wide sprawl of buildings. There were five hundred lush acres down there, lying in the low country at the foot of the Dale. The Sidlows were big, prosperous farmers with none of the worries of the hill men who struggled to exist on the bleak smallholdings higher up, and it was difficult to understand why my imagined affluence should be such an affront to them.

Another distinctly unfriendly client is the local scrap merchant and second-hand car dealer Walt Barnett. A hard-edged character, he keeps some livestock and horses, but calls James in to take a look at his ailing cat, Fred. James is surprised to discover there’s a sentimental side to the cheerless Walt Barnett, proving that even he has a heart and that animals can sometimes bring out the best in people.

When Walt Barnett asked me to see his cat I was surprised. He had employed other veterinary surgeons ever since Siegfried had mortally offended him by charging him ten pounds for castrating a horse, and that had been a long time ago. I was surprised, too, that a man like him should concern himself with the ailments of a cat.

A lot of people said Walt Barnett was the richest man in Darrowby – rolling in brass which he made from his many and diverse enterprises. He was mainly a scrap merchant, but he had a haulage business, too, and he was a dealer in second-hand cars, furniture – anything, in fact, that came his way. I knew he kept some livestock and horses around his big house outside the town, but there was money in these things and money was the ruling passion of his life. There was no profit in cat-keeping.

Another thing which puzzled me as I drove to his office was that owning a pet indicated some warmth of character, a vein of sentiment, however small. It just didn’t fit in with his nature.

I picked my way through the litter of the scrapyard to the wooden shed in the corner from which the empire was run. Walt Barnett was sitting behind a cheap desk and he was exactly as I remembered him, the massive body stretching the seams of his shiny navy-blue suit, the cigarette dangling from his lips, even the brown trilby hat perched on the back of his head. Unchanged, too, was the beefy red face with its arrogant expression and hostile eyes.

‘Over there,’ he said, glowering at me and poking a finger at a black and white cat sitting among the papers on the desk.

It was a typical greeting. I hadn't expected him to say 'Good morning' or anything like that, and he never smiled. I reached across the desk and tickled the animal's cheek, and was rewarded with a rich purring and an arching of the back against my hand. He was a big tom, long-haired and attractively marked with a white breast and white paws, and though I have always had a predilection for tabbies I took an immediate liking to this cat. He exuded friendliness. 'Nice cat,' I said. 'What's the trouble?'

James eventually discovers that somebody had cruelly put an elastic band first around the cat's legs and then his neck. As James explains, the police are aware that this cruelty occurs but they rarely catch the culprits in the act. A year later Fred falls ill, not by poisoning as Walt Barnett first suspects, but from an outbreak of the highly contagious virus, cat distemper. Fred sadly dies from the condition, much to the distress of his owner.

Fred was still and as I approached I saw with a dull feeling of inevitability that he was not breathing. I put my stethoscope over his heart for a few moments and then looked up.

'I'm afraid he's dead, Mr Barnett.'

The big man did not change expression. He reached slowly across and rubbed his forefinger against the dark fur in that familiar gesture. Then he put his elbows on the desk and covered his face with his hands.

I did not know what to say, but watched helplessly as his shoulders began to shake and tears welled between the thick fingers. He stayed like that for some time, then he spoke.

'He was my friend,' he said.

I still could find no words and the silence was heavy in the room until he suddenly pulled his hands from his face.

He glared at me defiantly. 'Aye, ah know what you're thinkin'. This is that big tough bugger, Walt Barnett, cryin' his eyes out over a cat. What a joke! I reckon you'll have a bloody good laugh later on.'

Evidently he was sure that what he considered a display of weakness would lower my opinion of him, and yet he was so wrong. I have liked him better ever since.

James and Siegfried come across many other local people who are just as sentimental about their animals, even if they're bred to feed their families or as farm livestock. With the size of farms on the increase, Siegfried in It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet reads

out an article claiming that the larger the farm, the less affection there is for the animals. The two vets agree that, sadly, this is likely to be the case.

As I sat at breakfast I looked out at the autumn mist dissolving in the early sunshine. It was going to be another fine day but there was a chill in the old house this morning, a shiveriness as though a cold hand had reached out to remind us that summer had gone and the hard months lay just ahead.

'It says here,' Siegfried said, adjusting his copy of the Darrowby and Houlton Times with care against the coffee pot, 'that farmers have no feeling for their animals.' I buttered a piece of toast and looked across at him.

'Cruel, you mean?'

'Well, not exactly, but this chap maintains that to a farmer, livestock are purely commercial – there's no sentiment in his attitude towards them, no affection.'

'Well, it wouldn't do if they were all like poor Kit Bilton, would it? They'd all go mad.'

Kit was a lorry driver who, like so many of the working men of Darrowby, kept a pig at the bottom of his garden for family consumption. The snag was that when killing time came, Kit wept for three days. I happened to go into his house on one of these occasions and found his wife and daughter hard at it cutting up the meat for pies and brawn while Kit huddled miserably by the kitchen fire, his eyes swimming with tears. He was a huge man who could throw a twelve-stone sack of meal on to his wagon with a jerk of his arms, but he seized my hand in his and sobbed at me, 'I can't bear it, Mr Herriot. He was like a Christian was that pig, just like a Christian.'

'No, I agree.' Siegfried leaned over and sawed off a slice of Mrs Hall's home-baked bread. 'But Kit isn't a real farmer. This article is about people who own large numbers of animals. The question is, is it possible for such men to become emotionally involved? Can the dairy farmer milking maybe fifty cows become really fond of any of them or are they just milk-producing units?'

'It's an interesting point,' I said, 'and I think you've put your finger on it with the numbers. You know there are a lot of our farmers up in the high country who have only a few stock. They always have names for their cows – Daisy, Mabel, I even came across one called Kipperlugs the other day. I do think these small farmers have an affection for their animals but I don't see how the big men can possibly have.'

One small farmer who is undoubtedly sentimental about his animals is Mr Dakin. In Vets Might Fly, James is sent to stitch up the udder of Blossom the cow, who lives in a cobbled byre with six other cows, all of whom have names. Blossom is very old and her drooping udder needs repeated stitching. It's clear she's reached the end of her

productive life and Mr Dakin reluctantly agrees to send her for slaughter. Dodson the drover is called in and James is there when he takes Blossom away. He and Mr Dakin then attend to one of the other cows which needs its afterbirth removing. When they have finished, James and Mr Dakin are suddenly alerted to another sound.

From somewhere on the hillside I could hear the clip-clop of a cow's feet. There were two ways to the farm and the sound came from a narrow track which joined the main road half a mile beyond the other entrance. As we listened a cow rounded a rocky outcrop and came towards us.

It was Blossom, moving at a brisk trot, great udder swinging, eyes fixed purposefully on the open door behind us.

'What the hangment . . .?' Mr Dakin burst out, but the old cow brushed past us and marched without hesitation into the stall which she had occupied for all those years. She sniffed enquiringly at the empty hay rack and looked round at her owner.

Mr Dakin stared back at her. The eyes in the weathered face were expressionless but the smoke rose from his pipe in a series of rapid puffs.

Mr Dodson the drover comes running after Blossom but Mr Dakin blocks his approach. He then fastens a chain around Blossom's neck and fills her rack with hay.

'What's to do, Mr Dakin?' the drover cried in bewilderment. 'They're waiting for me at t'mart!'

The farmer tapped out his pipe on the half door and began to fill it with black shag from a battered tin. 'Ah'm sorry to waste your time, Jack, but you'll have to go without 'er.'

'Without 'er . . .? But . . .?'

'Aye, ye'll think I'm daft, but that's how it is. T'awd lass has come 'ome and she's stoppin' 'ome.' He directed a look of flat finality at the drover.

Dodson nodded a couple of times then shuffled from the byre. Mr Dakin followed and called after him, 'Ah'll pay ye for your time, Jack. Put it down on ma bill.'

He returned, applied a match to his pipe and drew deeply.

'Mr Herriot,' he said as the smoke rose around his ears, 'do you ever feel when summat happens that it was meant to happen and that it was for t'best?'

'Yes, I do, Mr Dakin. I often feel that.'

‘Aye well, that’s how I felt when Blossom came down that hill.’ He reached out and scratched the root of the cow’s tail. ‘She’s allus been a favourite and by gaw I’m glad she’s back.’

‘But how about those teats? I’m willing to keep stitching them up, but . . .’

‘Nay, lad, ah’ve had an idea. Just came to me when you were tekkin’ away that cleansin’ and I thowt I was ower late.’

‘An idea?’

‘Aye.’ The old man nodded and tamped down the tobacco with his thumb. ‘I can put two or three calves on to ’er instead of milkin’ ’er. The old stable is empty – she can live in there where there’s nobody to stand on ’er awd tits.’

I laughed. ‘You’re right, Mr Dakin. She’d be safe in the stable and she’d suckle three calves easily. She could pay her way.’

‘Well, as ah said, it’s matterless. After all them years she doesn’t owe me a thing.’ A gentle smile spread over the seamed face. ‘Main thing is, she’s come ’ome.’

The tale of Blossom was inspired by a couple of incidents related to Alf, including one concerning a cow belonging to local Pauline Parlour, which ended up back at her family farm, and another by the dairy farmer and friend of Alf, Arthur Dand. Arthur had an aged cow which he reluctantly agreed to send for slaughter. When the slaughterman began to take her away in his truck, the sight and sound of his cow, giving a sad bellow, was too much for Arthur and he raced after the truck, retrieved his cow and brought her back home. As he said to Jim: ‘She may be no use to me any more, but she’s going to spend the rest of her days right here!’

When an animal had reached the end of its life, it was either sent to a slaughterhouse or, if it was deemed unfit for human consumption, to a knacker’s yard where the knackerman would slaughter and strip the carcass, selling the meat for pet food. Bones would also be sent to knife manufacturers for handles or rendered down to make fertilizer, hides sent to local tanneries, and oils might be used for soap or even by local football clubs to soften their boots or the cricket club to rub into their bats. In If Only They Could Talk, Jeff Mallock presides over the Darrowby knacker’s yard. He lives there, amid the rotting carcasses and stinking filth, with his wife Mrs Mallock and their eight children, all of whom seem to be in the peak of health.

In Darrowby the name Mallock had a ring of doom. It was the graveyard of livestock, of farmers’ ambitions, of veterinary surgeons’ hopes. If ever an animal was very ill somebody was bound to say: ‘I reckon she’ll be off to Mallock’s afore long,’ or ‘Jeff

Mallock'll have 'er in t'finish.' And the premises fitted perfectly into the picture: a group of drab, red-brick buildings standing a few fields back from the road with a stumpy chimney from which rolled endlessly a dolorous black smoke.

It didn't pay to approach Mallock's too closely unless you had a strong stomach, so the place was avoided by the townspeople, but if you ventured up the lane and peeped through the sliding metal doors you could look in on a nightmare world. Dead animals lay everywhere. Most of them were dismembered and great chunks of meat hung on hooks, but here and there you could see a bloated sheep or a greenish, swollen pig which not even Jeff could bring himself to open.

Skulls and dry bones were piled to the roof in places and brown mounds of meat meal stood in the corners. The smell was bad at any time but when Jeff was boiling up the carcasses it was indescribable. The Mallock family bungalow stood in the middle of the buildings and strangers could be pardoned if they expected a collection of wizened gnomes to dwell there. But Jeff was a pink-faced, cherubic man in his forties, his wife plump, smiling and comely. Their family ranged from a positively beautiful girl of nineteen down to a robust five-year-old boy. There were eight young Mallocks and they had spent their lifetimes playing among tuberculous lungs and a vast spectrum of bacteria from salmonella to anthrax. They were the healthiest children in the district.

It was said in the pubs that Jeff was one of the richest men in town but the locals, as they supped their beer, had to admit that he earned his money. At any hour of the day or night he would rattle out into the country in his ramshackle lorry, winch on a carcass, bring it back to the yard and cut it up. A dog food dealer came twice a week from Brawton with a van and bought the fresh meat. The rest of the stuff Jeff shovelled into his boiler to make the meat meal which was in great demand for mixing in pig and poultry rations. The bones went for making fertilizer, the hides to the tanner and the nameless odds and ends were collected by a wild-eyed individual known only as the 'ket feller'. Sometimes, for a bit of variety, Jeff would make long slabs of strange-smelling soap which found a brisk sale for scrubbing shop floors. Yes, people said, there was no doubt Jeff did all right. But, by gaw, he earned it.

The story no doubt resonates with Alf's own visits to knackers' yards. He visited his first one as a student, while working at a practice in Dumfries, Scotland, and the experience remained imprinted in his mind. On entering, the putrefying stink of dead and decomposing animals immediately overwhelmed him, causing him to vomit up his breakfast on the floor. All the while a slaughterman looked upon him while sat on a carcass munching a sandwich and drinking tea out of a cup smeared with fat and blood stains.

While the Mallocks are a particularly hardy family, James also comes across another robust character in the form of Roddy Travers. James spots him walking along the moorland roads, pushing a pram containing his dog and his only belongings. Clearly

living rough, he moves around the Yorkshire countryside and earns his keep by doing odd jobs on farms, helping out with ditching, hedging, looking after stock and drystone walling. Instead of hedges or fences, countless miles of drystone walls enclose the fields and border the roads throughout the fells of the Yorkshire Dales. They are built without mortar using an ancient and very skilled technique of fitting boulders and angular stones together, and in the wild weather of the moorland are in regular need of repair.

I suppose it isn't unusual to see a man pushing a pram in a town, but on a lonely moorland road the sight merits a second glance. Especially when the pram contains a large dog.

That was what I saw in the hills above Darrowby one morning and I slowed down as I drove past. I had noticed the strange combination before – on several occasions over the last few weeks – and it was clear that man and dog had recently moved into the district.

As the car drew abreast of him the man turned, smiled and raised his hand. It was a smile of rare sweetness in a very brown face. A forty-year-old face, I thought, above a brown neck which bore neither collar nor tie, and a faded striped shirt lying open over a bare chest despite the coldness of the day.

I couldn't help wondering who or what he was. The outfit of scuffed suede golf jacket, corduroy trousers and sturdy boots didn't give much clue. Some people might have put him down as an ordinary tramp, but there was a businesslike energetic look about him which didn't fit the term.

I wound the window down and the thin wind of a Yorkshire March bit at my cheeks.

'Nippy this morning,' I said.

The man seemed surprised. 'Aye,' he replied after a moment. 'Aye, reckon it is.'

I looked at the pram, ancient and rusty, and at the big animal sitting upright inside it. He was a lurcher, a cross-bred greyhound, and he gazed back at me with unruffled dignity.

'Nice dog,' I said.

'Aye, that's Jake.' The man smiled again, showing good regular teeth. 'He's a grand 'un.'

I waved and drove on. In the mirror I could see the compact figure stepping out briskly, head up, shoulders squared, and, rising like a statue from the middle of the

pram, the huge brindled form of Jake.

I didn't have to wait long to meet the unlikely pair again. I was examining a carthorse's teeth in a farmyard when on the hillside beyond the stable I saw a figure kneeling by a drystone wall. And by his side, a pram and a big dog sitting patiently on the grass.

'Hey, just a minute.' I pointed at the hill. 'Who is that?'

The farmer laughed. 'That's Roddy Travers. D'you ken 'im?'

'No, no I don't. I had a word with him on the road the other day, that's all.'

'Aye, on the road.' He nodded knowingly. 'That's where you'd see Roddy, right enough.'

'But what is he? Where does he come from?'

'He comes from somewhere in Yorkshire, but ah don't rightly know where and ah don't think anybody else does. But I'll tell you this – he can turn 'is hand to anything.'

'Yes,' I said, watching the man expertly laying the flat slabs of stone as he repaired a gap in the wall. 'There's not many can do what he's doing now.'

'That's true. Wallin' is a skilled job and it's dying out, but Roddy's a dab hand at it. But he can do owt – hedgin', ditchin', lookin' after stock, it's all the same to him.'

I lifted the tooth rasp and began to rub a few sharp corners off the horse's molars. 'And how long will he stay here?'

'Oh, when he's finished that wall he'll be off. Ah could do with 'im stoppin' around for a bit but he never stays in one place for long.'

'But hasn't he got a home anywhere?'

'Nay, nay.' The farmer laughed again. 'Roddy's got nowt. All 'e has in the world is in that there pram.'

The character of Roddy Travers was based on a roving handyman known to everyone in the district, Freddy Manners. He did everything from gardening and sharpening knives to general farm work and was one of many such types who travelled around doing odd jobs for people. He also had a big greyhound dog called Joe, which Donald bought from him and was one of the pack dogs that greeted Alf when he first arrived at the practice in Thirsk.

The Dales are filled with a wide assortment of folk and not all of them are gruff, rugged types, as James discovers when he meets Roland Partridge. Despite being a son of a small farmer, he lives as an artist, having eschewed the gritty life of farming – and dispensing with the broad Yorkshire accent – for a more creative and modest existence in Darrowby.

You could hardly expect to find a more unlikely character in Darrowby than Roland Partridge. The thought came to me for the hundredth time as I saw him peering through the window which looked onto Trengate just a little way up the other side of the street from our surgery.

He was tapping the glass and beckoning to me and the eyes behind the thick spectacles were wide with concern. I waited and when he opened the door I stepped straight from the street into his living room because these were tiny dwellings with only a kitchen in the rear and a single small bedroom overlooking the street above. But when I went in I had the familiar feeling of surprise. Because most of the other occupants of the row were farm workers and their furnishings were orthodox; but this place was a studio.

An easel stood in the light from the window and the walls were covered from floor to ceiling with paintings. Unframed canvases were stacked everywhere and the few ornate chairs and the table with its load of painted china and other bric-à-brac added to the artistic atmosphere.

The simple explanation was, of course, that Mr Partridge was in fact an artist. But the unlikely aspect came into it when you learned that this middle-aged velvet-jacketed aesthete was the son of a small farmer, a man whose forebears had been steeped in the soil for generations.

‘I happened to see you passing there, Mr Herriot,’ he said. ‘Are you terribly busy?’

‘Not too busy, Mr Partridge. Can I help you?’

He nodded gravely. ‘I wondered whether you could spare a moment to look at Percy. I’d be most grateful.’

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘Where is he?’

He was ushering me towards the kitchen when there was a bang on the outer door and Bert Hardisty the postman burst in. Bert was a rough-hewn character and he dumped a parcel unceremoniously on the table.

‘There y’are, Rolie!’ he shouted and turned to go.

Mr Partridge gazed with unruffled dignity at the retreating back. ‘Thank you very much indeed, Bertram, good day to you.’

Here was another thing. The postman and the artist were both Darrowby born and bred, had the same social background, had gone to the same school, yet their voices were quite different. Roland Partridge, in fact, spoke with the precise, well-modulated syllables of a barrister at law.

We went into the kitchen. This was where he cooked for himself in his bachelor state. When his father died many years ago he had sold the farm immediately. Apparently his whole nature was appalled by the earthy farming scene and he could not get out quickly enough. At any rate he had got sufficient money from the sale to indulge his interests and he had taken up painting and lived ever since in this humble cottage, resolutely doing his own thing. This had all happened long before I came to Darrowby and the dangling lank hair was silver now. I always had the feeling that he was happy in his way because I couldn’t imagine that small, rather exquisite figure plodding around a muddy farmyard.

Mr Partridge’s dog Percy has a large tumour on one of his testicles, which grows so large that he is subjected to ridicule by some of the locals, until Mr Partridge eventually allows James to remove it. A while later, he brings Percy into the surgery again and James is disappointed to see the tumour has spread. He decides to try a new hormonal treatment, Stilboestrol, which seems to stop the tumour growing, although either the drug or the dog’s tumour gives Percy the attributes of a bitch on heat and half the dogs in the neighbourhood start to hang around Mr Partridge’s house. Thankfully, the growth disappears and never returns, as is also the case with the local dogs, and over the years James is happy to see Mr Partridge and Percy pass his window in good health, their dignity very much restored.

Unlike Mr Partridge, some clients can be far less articulate when they come into the practice and it can be a struggle to understand what the problem is. Some locals turn up at Skeldale House on the way back from the pub and are too sozzled to make any sense. Others are incredibly vague about their animal’s ailments or agonize over whether they want a vet to visit, their anxiety centred upon the impending bill. And if an animal has a problem with anything vaguely sexual or a natural function, then some clients are too embarrassed to give any real detail, especially if it’s a man and a woman is in the vicinity. Mr Pinkerton, who comes into the practice with his dog, has that very problem.

Mr Pinkerton, a smallholder, was sitting in the office next to Miss Harbottle’s desk. By his side sat his farm collie.

‘Well, what can I do for you, Mr Pinkerton?’ I asked as I closed the door behind me.

The farmer hesitated. ‘It’s me dog – ’e isn’t right.’

‘What do you mean? Is he ill?’ I bent down and stroked the shaggy head and as the dog leaped up in delight his tail began to beat a booming tom-tom rhythm against the side of the desk.

‘Nay, nay, he’s right enough in ’imself.’ The man was clearly ill at ease.

‘Well, what’s the trouble? He looks the picture of health to me.’

‘Aye, but ah’m a bit worried. Ye see it’s ’is . . .’ He glanced furtively towards Miss Harbottle. ‘It’s ’is pencil.’

‘What d’you say?’

A faint flush mounted in Mr Pinkerton’s thin cheeks. Again he shot a terrified glance at Miss Harbottle. ‘It’s ’is . . . pencil. There’s summat matter with ’is pencil.’ He indicated by the merest twitch of his forefinger somewhere in the direction of the animal’s belly.

I looked. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t see anything unusual.’

‘Ah, but there is.’ The farmer’s face twisted in an agony of embarrassment and he pushed his face close to mine. ‘There’s summat there,’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘Summat comin’ from ’is . . .’is pencil.’

I got down on my knees and had a closer look, and suddenly all became clear.

‘Is that what you mean?’ I pointed to a tiny blob of semen on the end of the prepuce.

He nodded dumbly, his face a study of woe.

I laughed. ‘Well you can stop worrying. That’s nothing abnormal. You might call it an overflow. He’s just a young dog, isn’t he?’

‘Aye, nobbut eighteen months.’

‘Well, that’s it. He’s just too full of the joys. Plenty of good food and maybe not a lot of work to do, eh?’

‘Aye, he gets good grub. Nowt but the best. And you’re right – I ’aven’t much work for him.’

‘Well, there you are.’ I held out a hand. ‘Just cut down his diet and see he gets more

exercise and this thing will sort itself out.'

Most of James's clients consider him a capable vet, but there are a few farmers who, despite his best efforts, have a low opinion of him, principally because every time he visits them, something always seems to go wrong. Alf himself experienced what seem to be jinxed places, which he called 'bogey farms', where animals promptly died or inexplicable events happened. Such is the case in Every Living Thing when a series of minor accidents afflicts James whenever he visits the Hardwicks.

My clients' opinion of me varied widely, and although there were the odd one or two who thought I was brilliant, a large majority looked on me as a steady, reliable vet, while a few regarded me as of strictly limited ability. But I really think that only one family nourished the private conviction that I was not quite right in the head.

They were the Hardwicks, and it was a pity because they were some of my favourite people.

After a quick visit to the Hardwicks' farm to check on some calves he'd treated, James returns to his car and discovers that his dog, Dinah, has pushed down the doorknobs, accidentally locking the car from the inside. Apologizing, James has to ask one of the Hardwick brothers to drive him to Darrowby so he can retrieve the spare key. Subsequent trips involve him inadvertently picking up Mrs Hardwick's reading glasses and then turning up at the farm when he is meant to be at another one down the road. When he is next called to the Hardwicks', to examine a cow that can't get up, his embarrassment is now acute.

'She's got a dislocated hip, Seb,' I said. 'There's nothing broken, but the head of the femur is right out of its socket.'

'Are ye sure?' The farmer looked at me doubtfully.

'Absolutely positive. Here, feel this prominence. In fact, you can just about see it sticking up there.'

Seb didn't bother to take his hands out of his pockets. 'Well, ah don't know. I thought she'd maybe just strained 'erself. Maybe you could give me summat to rub on 'er – that might put her right.'

'No, I assure you. There's no doubt in my mind.'

'Awright, then, what do we do?'

'Well, we'll have to try to pull the joint back into place. It's not easy, but since it has only just happened I'd say there was a good chance of success.'

The farmer sniffed. ‘Very well, then. On ye go.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, smiling, ‘but it’s quite a big job and I can’t do it by myself. In fact, you and I can’t do it. We’ll need some help.’

‘Help? I haven’t got no ’elp. Josh is right over on the far field.’

‘Well, I’m really sorry about that, but you’ll have to get him back. And I hate to say it, but we’ll also need one of your neighbours to lend a hand. And he’d better be a big strong chap, too.’

‘Bloody ’ell!’ Seb stared at me. ‘What’s all this for?’

‘I know it seems a big fuss to you, but although she’s only a young beast, she’s big and strong and in order to get the joint back in place we have to overcome the muscular resistance. It needs a right good pull, I can tell you. I’ve done a lot of these jobs and I know.’

He nodded. ‘Ah well, I’ll go and see if Charlie Lawson can come over. You’ll wait ’ere, then?’

‘No, I’ll have to go back to the surgery for the chloroform muzzle.’

‘Chloroform! What the ’ell next?’

‘I told you about the muscular resistance. We need to put her to sleep to overcome that.’

‘Now, look ’ere, Mr Herriot.’ The farmer lifted a portentous forefinger. ‘Are ye sure we have to go through all this carry-on? Don’t ye think we could just rub summat on? A bit of embrocation, maybe?’

‘I’m sorry, Seb, it’s all necessary.’

He turned and strode out of the cow house, muttering, while I hurried across to my car.

On the journey to Darrowby and back, two thoughts were uppermost in my mind. This was one of the tricky jobs in veterinary practice but, when successful, it was spectacular. A hopelessly lame animal would rise and walk away, good as new. And I did feel I badly needed something to resuscitate my reputation on this farm.

When I returned with the muzzle, Josh and Charlie Lawson were waiting in the yard

with Seb. ‘Now, Mr Herriot,’ ‘Now then, Mr Herriot,’ but they looked at me sceptically, and I could tell that the other brother had been voicing his doubts.

‘It’s good of you gentlemen to rally round,’ I said cheerfully. ‘I hope you’re all feeling strong. It’s a tough job, this.’ Charlie Lawson grinned and rubbed his hands. ‘Aye, we’ll do our best.’

‘OK, now.’ I looked down at the heifer. ‘We’d better move her nearer the door. You’ll get a stronger pull that way. Then we’ll get the chloroform muzzle on and rope the leg. You’ll haul away while I put pressure on the joint. But first let’s roll her over.’

As the farmers pushed against the animal’s side, I tried to tuck the lame leg underneath her. As she rolled over there was a loud click, and after a rapid look around her she rose to her feet and walked out through the door.

The four of us watched her as she ambled across the yard and through a gate into the field. She was perfectly sound. Not the slightest trace of lameness.

‘Well, I’ve never seen that happen before,’ I gasped. ‘The rolling movement and the pressure on the joint must have clicked it back. Would you believe it!’

The three farmers gave me a level stare. It was clear that they didn’t believe it.

Retreating to my car, I heard Seb confiding to the other two. ‘Might as well have rubbed summat on it.’ And as I drove away past the heifer grazing contentedly on the green hillside, Siegfried’s words at the beginning of our partnership came back to me. ‘Our profession offers unparalleled opportunities for making a chump of yourself.’

How true that was. How true it would always be. But why, why, why did it have to happen this time at the Hardwicks’?