They didn’t say anything about this in the books, I thought, as the snow blew in through the gaping doorway and settled on my naked back.

I lay face down on the cobbled floor in a pool of nameless muck, my arm deep inside the straining cow, my feet scrabbling for a toehold between the stones. I was stripped to the waist and the snow mingled with the dirt and the dried blood on my body. I could see nothing outside the circle of flickering light thrown by the smoky oil lamp which the farmer held over me.

No, there wasn’t a word in the books about searching for your ropes and instruments in the shadows; about trying to keep clean in a half-bucket of tepid water; about the cobbles digging into your chest. Nor about the slow numbing of the arms, the creeping paralysis of the muscles as the fingers tried to work against the cow’s powerful expulsive efforts.

There was no mention anywhere of the gradual exhaustion, the feeling of futility and the little far-off voice of panic.

If Only They Could Talk begins with a gruelling calving, James having crawled out of his bed at 2 a.m. before heading across a snowy moorland, only to spend the next few hours with his arm inside a straining cow. This was the reality of veterinary practice in rural Yorkshire where cattle-farming predominated, and the likes of James Herriot were frequently called out to attend to calvings and the host of complications that can ensue when a cow gives birth. Stripped to the waist in a cold cow byre, veterinary surgeons had to work hard to find feet, bring heads round and do all they could to deliver a healthy calf.

James and Siegfried are called in all year round to attend to cattle, and a veterinary practice in rural Yorkshire relies upon its regular income – one of the reasons why Alf Wight had a great affection for the bovine race in general. Some cattle were raised for beef but vets saw more of the dairy cows which needed to calve at least once a year so they could continue to produce milk.

Prior to arriving in Yorkshire, Alf had had some practical experience of working with cows, having spent his university vacations in Dumfries in the south-west of Scotland. There, he looked after Galloway cattle and on one occasion was given the opportunity to remove the afterbirth from a cow chained up in a rickety old henhouse. When he gently tugged at the hanging mass, the cow bellowed, broke through its chain,

smashed through the window, taking one side of the henhouse with her, with the remainder collapsing on top of the men standing there. They all survived intact although the incident at least prepared Alf for the physical rigours of bovine care in later years.

Returning to If Only They Could Talk and James, still with his arm in the cow, must summon every ounce of strength he has to deliver the calf, while the dour farmers look on, more concerned about the welfare of their prized cow than that of the young veterinary surgeon.

My mind went back to that picture in the obstetrics book. A cow standing in the middle of a gleaming floor while a sleek veterinary surgeon in a spotless parturition overall inserted his arm to a polite distance. He was relaxed and smiling, the farmer and his helpers were smiling, even the cow was smiling. There was no dirt or blood or sweat anywhere.

That man in the picture had just finished an excellent lunch and had moved next door to do a bit of calving just for the sheer pleasure of it, as a kind of dessert. He hadn't crawled shivering from his bed at two o'clock in the morning and bumped over twelve miles of frozen snow, staring sleepily ahead till the lonely farm showed in the headlights. He hadn't climbed half a mile of white fell-side to the doorless barn where his patient lay.

I tried to wriggle my way an extra inch inside the cow. The calf's head was back and I was painfully pushing a thin, looped rope towards its lower jaw with my fingertips. All the time my arm was being squeezed between the calf and the bony pelvis. With every straining effort from the cow the pressure became almost unbearable, then she would relax and I would push the rope another inch. I wondered how long I would be able to keep this up. If I didn't snare that jaw soon I would never get the calf away. I groaned, set my teeth and reached forward again.

Another little flurry of snow blew in and I could almost hear the flakes sizzling on my sweating back. There was sweat on my forehead too, and it trickled into my eyes as I pushed.

There is always a time at a bad calving when you begin to wonder if you will ever win the battle. I had reached this stage.

Little speeches began to flit through my brain. 'Perhaps it would be better to slaughter this cow. Her pelvis is so small and narrow that I can't see a calf coming through,' or 'She's a good fat animal and really of the beef type, so don't you think it would pay you better to get the butcher?' or perhaps 'This is a very bad presentation. In a roomy cow it would be simple enough to bring the head round but in this case it is just about impossible.'

Of course, I could have delivered the calf by embryotomy – by passing a wire over the neck and sawing off the head. So many of these occasions ended with the floor strewn with heads, legs, heaps of intestines. There were thick textbooks devoted to the countless ways you could cut up a calf.

But none of it was any good here, because this calf was alive. At my furthest stretch I had got my finger as far as the commissure of the mouth and had been startled by a twitch of the little creature's tongue. It was unexpected because calves in this position are usually dead, asphyxiated by the acute flexion of the neck and the pressure of the dam's powerful contractions. But this one had a spark of life in it and if it came out it would have to be in one piece.

I went over to my bucket of water, cold now and bloody, and silently soaped my arms. Then I lay down again, feeling the cobbles harder than ever against my chest. I worked my toes between the stones, shook the sweat from my eyes and for the hundredth time thrust an arm that felt like spaghetti into the cow; alongside the little dry legs of the calf, like sandpaper tearing against my flesh, then to the bend in the neck and so to the ear and then, agonizingly, along the side of the face towards the lower jaw which had become my major goal in life.

It was incredible that I had been doing this for nearly two hours; fighting as my strength ebbed to push a little noose round that jaw. I had tried everything else – repelling a leg, gentle traction with a blunt hook in the eye socket, but I was back to the noose.

James must struggle on with the calving in the presence of the farmer Mr Dinsdale, 'a long, sad, silent man of few words' along with his equally silent son, both of them watch the vet's efforts with deepening gloom. Worst of all, however, is the presence of 'Uncle', Mr Dinsdale's brother, a farmer who keeps up a non-stop stream of comments, while eulogizing about his wonderful vet Mr Broomfield. As Uncle blethers on about Mr Broomfield's Herculean strength, James, now exhausted, considers tipping the bucket of water over Uncle's head, then running down the hill and driving away 'from Yorkshire, from Uncle, from the Dinsdales, from this cow'.

Instead, I clenched my teeth, braced my legs and pushed with everything I had; and with a sensation of disbelief I felt my noose slide over the sharp little incisor teeth and into the calf's mouth. Gingerly, muttering a prayer, I pulled on the thin rope with my left hand and felt the slipknot tighten. I had hold of that lower jaw.

At last I could start doing something. 'Now hold this rope, Mr Dinsdale, and just keep a gentle tension on it. I'm going to repel the calf and if you pull steadily at the same time, the head ought to come round.'

‘What if the rope comes off?’ asked Uncle hopefully.

I didn’t answer. I put my hand in against the calf’s shoulder and began to push against the cow’s contractions. I felt the small body moving away from me. ‘Now a steady pull, Mr Dinsdale, without jerking.’ And to myself, ‘Oh God, don’t let it slip off.’

The head was coming round. I could feel the neck straightening against my arm, then the ear touched my elbow. I let go the shoulder and grabbed the little muzzle. Keeping the teeth away from the vaginal wall with my hand, I guided the head till it was resting where it should be, on the fore limbs.

Quickly I extended the noose till it reached behind the ears. ‘Now pull on the head as she strains.’

‘Nay, you should pull on the legs now,’ cried Uncle.

‘Pull on the bloody head rope, I tell you!’ I bellowed at the top of my voice and felt immediately better as Uncle retired, offended, to his bale.

With traction the head was brought out and the rest of the body followed easily. The little animal lay motionless on the cobbles, eyes glassy and unseeing, tongue blue and grossly swollen.

‘It’ll be dead. Bound to be,’ grunted Uncle, returning to the attack.

I cleared the mucus from the mouth, blew hard down the throat and began artificial respiration. After a few pressures on the ribs, the calf gave a gasp and the eyelids flickered. Then it started to inhale and one leg jerked.

Uncle begrudgingly accepts that the calf is alive – ‘I’d have thowt it’d sure to be dead after you’d messed about all that time.’ James positions the calf by its mother who licks it methodically and within a minute it is trying to sit up. James grins at what always feels like a miracle of life, although he is exhausted, with every muscle aching and his mouth parched from thirst.

A long, sad figure hovered near. ‘How about a drink?’ asked Mr Dinsdale.

I could feel my grimy face cracking into an incredulous smile. A vision of hot tea well laced with whisky swam before me. ‘That’s very kind of you, Mr Dinsdale, I’d love a drink. It’s been a hard two hours.’

‘Nay,’ said Mr Dinsdale looking at me steadily, ‘I meant for the cow.’

Calving a cow often made for a dramatic event, especially in the pre-war days when

caesareans were not generally an option for veterinary surgeons. In essence, the calf needed to come out the way nature intended, and if there were complications, the fate of the calf and its mother – not to mention the reputation of the vet – could hang in the balance. James is more than aware of this when in It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet he attends to the calving of the Aldersons' pet Jersey cow Candy. Not only does James want to make a good impression on Mr Alderson, as these were early days and he was his prospective father-in-law, but James also knows just how special a cow this is to the family.

She was the house cow, a pretty little Jersey and Mr Alderson's particular pet. She was the sole member of her breed in the herd but whereas the milk from the shorthorns went into the churns to be collected by the big dairy, Candy's rich yellow offering found its way onto the family porridge every morning or appeared heaped up on trifles and fruit pies or was made into butter, a golden creamy butter to make you dream.

James examines Candy, hoping the problem is something simple. It's not a good sign, however, when he hears Candy has been labouring for hours, with nothing to show for it. He feels inside but can only find an empty vagina and a small, ridged opening, beyond which he can feel the feet and head of a calf.

My spirits plummeted. Torsion of the uterus. There was going to be no easy victory for me here.

I sat back on my heels and turned to the farmer. 'She's got a twisted calf bed. There's a live calf in there all right, but there's no way out for it – I can barely get my hand through.'

'Aye, I thought it was something peculiar.' Mr Alderson rubbed his chin and looked at me doubtfully. 'What can we do about it, then?'

'We'll have to try to correct the twist by rolling the cow over while I keep hold of the calf. It's a good job there's plenty of us here.'

'And that'll put everything right, will it?'

I swallowed. I didn't like these jobs. Sometimes rolling worked and sometimes it didn't and in those days we hadn't quite got round to performing caesareans on cows. If I was unsuccessful I had the prospect of telling Mr Alderson to send Candy to the butcher. I banished the thought quickly.

With two men holding the front and hind legs and Mr Alderson holding Candy's head, James pushes his hand inside, grab's the calf's foot and they roll the cow onto her side. After James's arm is almost crushed, they roll her back on the other side, James lying face down and holding grimly on. Nothing happens and they try once more and then,

finally, everything magically unravels. Candy gives a determined push and out pops the calf, wet and wriggling. As Alf writes, ‘After every delivery there is a feeling of relief but in this case it was overwhelming.’ With Candy the cow saved, James decides this is a good moment to approach Mr Alderson about his intended proposal to his daughter.

Such life-or-death events – with all the emotions that go with them – are commonplace for veterinary surgeons, as it was for Alf in practice. Sometimes there was simply no viable way to extract a live calf and it was the job of the vet always to make firm and sometimes difficult decisions quickly. Jim remembers his father telling him about a time when his old college friend Eddie Straiton came to work at the Thirsk practice and they were called to a calving. They both came to the decision that attempting to extract a large calf out of the cow in question would likely kill the mother. They advised the farmer that the best option was to slaughter the cow so he at least would receive a good price for her carcass. Another man who had been observing the proceedings, however, suggested he ‘’ave a go’. He then inserted his arm into the cow’s vagina and, using a knife, produced the decomposing calf bit by bit. Alf and Eddie, now utterly dejected, left feeling that they had failed, their reputation and careers in tatters. Their decision, however, would be vindicated when they later discovered the cow died almost instantly afterwards and that the farmer in question had wished he’d listened to the two young veterinary surgeons.

By the time of The Lord God Made Them All, set in the years just after the war, caesareans are beginning to be done on cows or at least taught to students in veterinary colleges. In fact, veterinary medicine and procedures had advanced considerably since Alf had been at college and he knew that some of the students who worked at the practice had a little more knowledge about the latest methods. The assistant Norman Beaumont who features in The Lord God Made Them All suggests they do a caesarean on a small cow named Bella who is unable to give birth to her large calf. James agrees this would be a good case for the new procedure but needs Norman to guide him through it.

We do these jobs under a local anaesthetic nowadays, and in most cases the cow lies quietly on her side or even stands during the operation. The animal can’t feel anything, of course, but I have a few extra grey hairs round my ears which owe their presence to the occasional wild cow suddenly rearing up halfway through and taking off with me in desperate pursuit trying to keep her internal organs from flopping on the ground.

But that was all in the future. On this first occasion I had no such fears. I cut through skin, muscle layers and peritoneum and was confronted by a protruding pink and white mass of tissue.

I poked at it with my finger. There was something hard inside. Could it be the calf?

‘What’s that?’ I hissed.

‘Eh?’ Norman, kneeling by my side, jumped convulsively. ‘What do you mean?’

‘That thing. Is it the rumen or the uterus? It’s pretty low down, it could be the uterus.’

The student swallowed a couple of times. ‘Yes . . . yes . . . that’s the uterus all right.’

‘Good.’ I smiled in relief and made a bold incision. A great gout of impacted grass welled out, followed by a burst of gas and an outflow of dirty brown fluid.

‘Oh Christ!’ I gasped. ‘It’s the rumen. Look at all that bloody mess!’ I groaned aloud as the filthy tide surged away down and out of sight into the abdominal cavity. ‘What the hell are you playing at, Norman?’

I could feel the young man’s body trembling against mine.

‘Don’t just sit there!’ I shouted. ‘Thread me one of those needles. Quick! Quick!’

Norman bounded to his feet, rushed over to the bale and returned with a trailing length of catgut extended in shaking fingers. Wordlessly, dry-mouthed, I stitched the gash I had made in the wrong organ. Then the two of us made frantic attempts to swab away the escaped rumenal contents with cotton wool and antiseptic but much of it had run away beyond our reach. The contamination must be massive.

When we had done what we could, I sat back and looked at the student. My voice was a hoarse growl. ‘I thought you knew all about these operations.’

He looked at me with frightened eyes. ‘They do quite a few of them at the clinic.’

I glared back at him. ‘How many caesareans have you seen?’

‘Well . . . er . . . one, actually.’

‘One! To hear you speak I thought you were an expert! And anyway, even if you’d seen only one you should know a little bit about it.’

‘The thing is . . .’ Norman shuffled his knees around on the cobbles. ‘You see . . . I was right at the back of the class.’

I worked up a sarcastic snarl. ‘Oh, I understand. So you couldn’t see very well?’

‘That’s about it.’ The young man hung his head.

‘Well, you’re a stupid young fool!’ I said in a vicious whisper. ‘Dishing out your confident instructions when you know damn-all. You realize you’ve killed this good cow? With all that contamination she’ll certainly develop peritonitis and die. All we can hope for now is to get the calf out alive.’ With an effort I turned my gaze from his stricken face. ‘Anyway, let’s get on with it.’

Apart from my first shouts of panic the entire interchange had been carried out pianissimo and Mr Bushell kept shooting enquiring glances at us.

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile and returned to the attack. Getting the calf out alive was easy to say, but it soon dawned on me that getting the calf out in any way whatsoever was going to be a mammoth task. Plunging my arm deep below what I now knew was the rumen I encountered a smooth and mighty organ lying on the abdominal floor. It contained an enormous bulk with the hardness and immobility of a sack of coal.

I felt my way along the surface and came upon the unmistakable contours of a hock pushing against the slippery wall. That was the calf all right, but it was far far away.

I withdrew my arm and started on Norman again. ‘From your position at the back of the class,’ I enquired bitingly, ‘did you happen to notice what they did next?’

‘Next? Ah yes.’ He licked his lips and I could see beads of sweat on his brow. ‘You are supposed to exteriorize the uterus.’

‘Exteriorize it? Bring it up to the wound, you mean?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Good God!’ I said. ‘King Kong couldn’t lift up that bloody uterus. In fact I can’t move it an inch. Have a feel.’

The student, who was stripped and soaped like myself, introduced his arm and for a few moments I watched his eyes pop and his face redden. Then he withdrew and nodded sheepishly. ‘You’re right. It won’t move.’

‘Only one thing to do.’ I picked up a scalpel. ‘I’ll have to cut into the uterus and grab that hock. There’s nothing else to get hold of.’

It was very nasty fiddling about away out of sight down in the dark unknown, my arm buried to the shoulder in the cow, my tongue hanging out with anxiety. I was terrified I might slash into something vital but in fact it was my own fingers that I cut, several times, before I was able to draw the scalpel edge across the bulge made by the hock. A

second later I had my hand round the hairy leg. Now I was getting somewhere.

Gingerly I enlarged the incision, inch by inch. I hoped fervently I had made it big enough, but working blind is a terrible thing and it was difficult to be sure.

At any rate I couldn't wait to deliver that calf. I laid aside my knife, seized the leg and tried to lift it, and immediately I knew that another little nightmare lay ahead. The thing was a tremendous weight and it was going to take great strength to bring it up into the light of day. Nowadays when I do a caesar I take care to have a big strong farm lad stripped off ready to help me with this lifting job, but today I had only Norman.

'Come on,' I panted. 'Give me a hand.'

James manages to bring the foot of the calf round and grasp the other hind leg, and then, both men pulling with every vestige of their strength, the tail appears, then a huge ribcage and, finally, with a rush, the shoulders and head. As the calf snorts, the farmer exclaims, 'By gaw, he's a big 'un.' It is indeed a massive bull who would have never come out the usual way.

My attention was whisked back to the cow. Where was the uterus? It had vanished. Again I started my frantic groping inside. My hand became entangled with yards of placenta. Oh hell, that wouldn't do any good floating around among the guts. I pulled it out and dropped it on the floor but I still couldn't find the uterus. For a palpitating moment I wondered what would happen if I never did locate it, then my fingers came upon the ragged edge of my incision.

I pulled as much as possible of the organ up to the light and I noticed with sinking disquiet that my original opening had been enlarged by the passage of that enormous calf and there was a long tear disappearing out of sight towards the cervix.

'Sutures.' I held my hand out and Norman gave me a fresh needle. 'Hold the lips of the wound,' I said and began to stitch.

I worked as quickly as I could and was doing fine until the tear ran out of sight. The rest was a kind of martyrdom. Norman hung on grimly while I stabbed around at the invisible tissue far below. At times I pricked the young man's fingers, at others my own. And to my dismay a further complication had arisen.

The calf was now on his feet, blundering unsteadily around. The speed with which newly born animals get on to their legs has always fascinated me but at this moment it was an unmitigated nuisance.

The calf, looking for the udder with that instinct which nobody can explain, kept

pushing his nose at the cow's flank and at times toppling head first into the gaping hole in her side.

'Reckon 'e wants back in again,' Mr Bushell said with a grin. 'By 'eck, he is a wick 'un.'

'Wick' is Yorkshire for lively and the word was never more aptly applied. As I worked, eyes half closed, jaws rigid, I had to keep nudging the wet muzzle away with my elbow, but as fast as I pushed him back the calf charged in again and with sick resignation I saw that every time he nosed his way into the cavity he brought particles of straw and dirt from the floor and spread them over the abdominal contents.

'Look at that,' I moaned. 'As if there wasn't enough muck in there.'

Norman didn't reply. His mouth was hanging open and the sweat ran down his blood-streaked face as he grappled with that unseen wound. And in his fixed stare I seemed to read a growing doubt as to his wisdom in deciding to be a veterinary surgeon.

I would rather not go into any more details. The memory is too painful. Sufficient to say that after an eternity I got as far down the uterine tear as I could, then we cleared away a lot of rubbish from the cow's abdomen and covered everything with antiseptic dusting powder. I stitched up the muscle and skin layers with the calf trying all the time to get in on the act and at last the thing was finished.

Norman and I got to our feet very slowly, like two old, old men. It took me a long time to straighten my back and I saw the young man rubbing tenderly at his lumbar region. Then, since we were both plastered with caked blood and filth, we began the slow process of scrubbing and scraping ourselves clean.

Mr Bushell left his position by the head and looked at the row of skin stitches. 'Nice neat job,' he said. 'And a grand calf, too.'

Yes, that was something. The little creature had dried off now and he was a beauty, his body swaying on unsteady legs, his wideset eyes filled with gentle curiosity. But that 'neat job' hid things I didn't dare think about.

Antibiotics were still not in general use but in any case I knew there was no hope for the cow. More as a gesture than anything else I left the farmer some sulpha powders to give her three times a day. Then I got off the farm as quickly as I could.

We drove away in silence. I rounded a couple of corners, then stopped the car under a tree and sank my head against the steering wheel.

'Oh hell,' I groaned. 'What a bloody balls-up.'

Norman replied only with a long sigh and I continued. ‘Did you ever see such a performance? All that straw and dirt and rumenal muck in among that poor cow’s bowels. Do you know what I was thinking about towards the end? I was remembering the story of that human surgeon of olden times who left his hat inside his patient. It was as bad as that.’

They leave convinced that they will never see Bella alive again, that she probably has a good-sized hole in her uterus and peritonitis (caused by infection) is inevitable. The next morning, however, James phones Mr Bushell to see if Bella has survived the night, only to discover that she is up and eating and ‘bright as a cricket’. James is utterly astonished and Bella recovers fully without showing any symptoms from the ordeal.

That was the way it was at my first caesarean. Over the years Bella went on to have eight more calves normally and unaided, a miracle which I can still hardly believe.

But Norman and I were not to know that. All we felt then was an elation which was all the sweeter for being unexpected. As we drove away I looked at the young man’s smiling face.

‘Well, Norman,’ I said. ‘That’s veterinary practice for you. You get a lot of nasty shocks but some lovely surprises too. I’ve often heard of the wonderful resistance of the bovine peritoneum and thank heavens it’s true.’

While cattle can be remarkably resistant to infection, as Bella the cow shows, there are a myriad of complications that can ensue after giving birth. Uterus inversion, when the cow continues to push out the entire uterus, presents veterinary surgeons with one of their most difficult and physically demanding challenges. Returning a uterus, an enormous pink mass, through the relatively small opening of the vagina is both awkward and exhausting work.

It happens when the cow, after calving, continues to strain until it pushes the entire uterus out and it hangs down as far as the animal’s hocks. It is a vast organ and desperately difficult to replace, mainly because the cow, having once got rid of it, doesn’t want it back. And in a straightforward contest between man and beast the odds were very much on the cow.

The old practitioners, in an effort to even things up a bit, used to sling the cow up by its hind limbs and the more inventive among them came up with all sorts of contraptions like the uterine valise which was supposed to squeeze the organ into a smaller bulk. But the result was usually the same – hours of back-breaking work.

The introduction of the epidural anaesthetic made everything easier by removing

sensation from the uterus and preventing the cow from straining but, for all that, the words ‘calf bed out’ coming over the line were guaranteed to wipe the smile off any vet’s face.

I decided to take Tristan in case I needed a few pounds of extra push. He came along but showed little enthusiasm for the idea. He showed still less when he saw the patient, a very fat shorthorn lying, quite unconcerned, in her stall. Behind her, a bloody mass of uterus, afterbirth, muck and straw spilled over into the channel.

She wasn’t at all keen to get up, but after we had done a bit of shouting and pushing at her shoulder she rose to her feet, looking bored.

The epidural space was difficult to find among the rolls of fat and I wasn’t sure if I had injected all the anaesthetic into the right place. I removed the afterbirth, cleaned the uterus and placed it on a clean sheet held by the farmer and his brother. They were frail men and it was all they could do to keep the sheet level. I wouldn’t be able to count on them to help much.

I nodded to Tristan; we stripped off our shirts, tied clean sacks round our waists and gathered the uterus in our arms.

It was badly engorged and swollen and it took us just an hour to get it back. There was a long spell at the beginning when we made no progress at all and the whole idea of pushing the enormous organ through a small hole seemed ludicrous, like trying to thread a needle with a sausage. Then there were a few minutes when we thought we were doing famously only to find we were feeding the thing down through a tear in the sheet (Siegfried once told me he had spent half a morning trying to stuff a uterus up a cow’s rectum. What really worried him, he said, was that he nearly succeeded) and at the end, when hope was fading, there was the blissful moment when the whole thing began to slip inside and incredibly disappeared from sight.

Somewhere halfway through we both took a breather at the same time and stood panting, our faces almost touching. Tristan’s cheeks were prettily patterned where a spouting artery had sprayed him; I was able to look deep into his eyes and I read there a deep distaste for the whole business.

Lathering myself in the bucket and feeling the ache in my shoulders and back, I looked over at Tristan. He was pulling his shirt over his head as though it cost him the last of his strength. The cow, chewing contentedly at a mouthful of hay, had come best out of the affair.

Out in the car, Tristan groaned. ‘I’m sure that sort of thing isn’t good for me. I feel as though I’ve been run over by a steamroller. Hell, what a life this is at times.’

In It Shouldn’t Happen to a Vet James is called to Dick Rudd’s farm to take a look at his prized dairy shorthorn cow, Strawberry. Shorthorns, their red, white and dark roan colours once a common sight in Yorkshire, could be bred for milk or beef. At one point most of the Wensleydale cheese, originally made in the Yorkshire Dales, was made from the milk of shorthorns.

Dick’s cows had been scratched together over the years and they were a motley lot. Many of them were old animals discarded by more prosperous farmers because of their pendulous udders or because they were ‘three titted ’uns’. Others had been reared by Dick from calves and tended to be rough haired and scruffy. But halfway down the byre, contrasting almost violently with her neighbours, was what seemed to me a perfect dairy shorthorn cow.

In these days when the Friesian has surged over England in a black and white flood and inundated even the Dales which were the very home of the shorthorn, such cows as I looked at that day at Dick Rudd’s are no longer to be seen, but she represented all the glory and pride of her breed. The wide pelvis tapering to fine shoulders and a delicate head, the level udder thrusting back between the hind legs, and the glorious colour – dark roan. That was what they used to call a ‘good colour’ and whenever I delivered a dark roan calf the farmer would say ‘It’s a good-coloured ’un’, and it would be more valuable accordingly. The geneticists are perfectly right, of course: the dark roaned cows gave no more milk than the reds or the whites, but we loved them and they were beautiful.

‘Where did she come from, Dick?’ I said, still staring.

Dick’s voice was elaborately casual. ‘Oh, ah went over to Weldon’s of Cranby and picked her out. D’you like her?’

‘She’s a picture – a show cow. I’ve never seen one better.’ Weldon’s were the biggest pedigree breeders in the northern Dales and I didn’t ask whether Dick had cajoled his bank manager or had been saving up for years just for this.

‘Aye, she’s a seven-galloner when she gets goin’ and top butter fat, too. Reckon she’ll be as good as two of my other cows and a calf out of her’ll be worth a bit.’ He stepped forward and ran his hand along the perfectly level, smoothly fleshed back. ‘She’s got a great fancy pedigree name but missus ’as called her Strawberry.’

I knew as I stood there in the primitive, cobbled byre with its wooden partitions and rough stone walls that I was looking not just at a cow but at the foundation of the new herd, at Dick Rudd’s hopes for the future.

It was about a month later that he phoned me. ‘I want you to come and look at Strawberry for me,’ he said. ‘She’s been doing grand, tipplin’ the milk out, but there’s

summat amiss with her this morning.'

The cow didn't really look ill and, in fact, she was eating when I examined her; but I noticed that she gulped slightly when she swallowed. Her temperature was normal and her lungs clear but when I stood up by her head I could just hear a faint snorting sound.

'It's her throat, Dick,' I said. 'It may be just a bit of inflammation but there's a chance that she's starting a little abscess in there.' I spoke lightly but I wasn't happy. Postpharyngeal abscesses were, in my limited experience, nasty things. They were situated in an inaccessible place, right away behind the back of the throat and if they got very large could interfere seriously with the breathing. I had been lucky with the few I had seen; they had either been small and regressed or had ruptured spontaneously.

I gave an injection of Prontosil and turned to Dick. 'I want you to foment this area behind the angle of the jaw with hot water and rub this salve well in afterwards. You may manage to burst it that way. Do this at least three times a day.'

I kept looking in at her over the next ten days and the picture was one of steady development of the abscess. The cow was still not acutely ill but she was eating a lot less, she was thinner and was going off her milk. Most of the time I felt rather helpless as I knew that only the rupture of the abscess would bring relief and the various injections I was giving her were largely irrelevant. But the infernal thing was taking a long time to burst.

After three days, Dick calls James back in and he's shocked to see Strawberry in a terrible way, rasping and little more than a skeleton. James hopes that her abscess will burst that night but when it doesn't, he decides to operate on Strawberry, cutting into and draining the abscess in a procedure he has never done before. The following day, she looks worse than ever and they fear she'll end up at the knacker's yard. Then, thankfully, she turns a corner and thereon starts to recover: 'I saw her three weeks later and her bones were magically clothed with flesh, her skin shone and, most important, the magnificent udder bulged turgid beneath her, a neat little teat proudly erect at each corner.'

It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet opens with James visiting Mr Handshaw's cow, which, despite being treated for milk fever, is unable to get up. Milk fever is a condition that can come on soon after calving, resulting in a cow becoming extremely weak and unable to get on its feet. By the 1930s it was established that a very low level of calcium in the blood caused the symptoms, although in this case James suspects there's another reason why Mr Handshaw's cow won't stand.

I could see that Mr Handshaw didn't believe a word I was saying. He looked down at

his cow and his mouth tightened into a stubborn line.

‘Broken pelvis? You’re trying to tell me she’ll never get up n’more? Why, look at her chewing her cud! I’ll tell you this, young man – me dad would’ve soon got her up if he’d been alive today.’

I had been a veterinary surgeon for a year now and I had learned a few things. One of them was that farmers weren’t easy men to convince – especially Yorkshire Dalesmen.

And that bit about his dad. Mr Handshaw was in his fifties and I suppose there was something touching about his faith in his late father’s skill and judgement. But I could have done very nicely without it.

It had acted as an additional irritant in a case in which I felt I had troubles enough. Because there are few things which get more deeply under a vet’s skin than a cow which won’t get up. To the layman it may seem strange that an animal can be apparently cured of its original ailment and yet be unable to rise from the floor, but it happens. And it can be appreciated that a completely recumbent milk cow has no future.

The case had started when my boss, Siegfried Farnon, who owned the practice in the little Dales market town of Darrowby, sent me to a milk fever. This suddenly occurring calcium deficiency attacks high-yielding animals just after calving and causes collapse and progressive coma. When I first saw Mr Handshaw’s cow she was stretched out motionless on her side, and I had to look carefully to make sure she wasn’t dead.

But I got out my bottles of calcium with an airy confidence because I had been lucky enough to qualify just about the time when the profession had finally got on top of this hitherto fatal condition. The breakthrough had come many years earlier with inflation of the udder and I still carried a little blowing-up outfit around with me (the farmers used bicycle pumps), but with the advent of calcium therapy one could bask in a cheap glory by jerking an animal back from imminent death within minutes. The skill required was minimal but it looked very very good.

By the time I had injected the two bottles – one into the vein, the other under the skin – and Mr Handshaw had helped me roll the cow onto her chest the improvement was already obvious; she was looking about her and shaking her head as if wondering where she had been for the last few hours. I felt sure that if I had had the time to hang about for a bit I could see her on her feet. But other jobs were waiting.

When the cow still isn’t up the next day, James returns to inject another bottle of calcium, still confident that she’ll get back on her feet. After forty-eight hours, however, there’s still no change and James is increasingly worried about her condition. Mr Handshaw, now on the offensive, suggests a couple of home-spun remedies

popular with farmers, including cutting off the cow's tail to force her to get up. James refuses to resort to that, as it's painful for the cow, but he does try bellowing in the cow's ear, which serves only to stop the cow chewing for a moment.

The next day, James returns to find Mr Handshaw's neighbours assembled around the still-recumbent cow. Putting sacks under her, they heave the cow up onto her feet, but she just hangs there placidly with her legs dangling until, with a lot of puffing and grunting, they lower the inert body back down. Mr Handshaw then suggests dogs might get the cow up and the assembled farmers immediately rush off to get their dogs but the cow just ignores their snapping and snarling, even when the dogs break into a vicious fight. Somehow, despite the din all around, James hears a creaking sound coming from the cow's pelvis and he decides to examine the animal again.

I stripped off my jacket, soaped my arms and pushed a hand into the cow's rectum until I felt the hard bone of the pubis. Gripping it through the wall of the rectum I looked up at my audience. 'Will two of you get hold of the hook bones and rock the cow gently from side to side.'

Yes, there it was again, no mistake about it. I could both hear and feel it – a looseness, a faint creaking, almost a grating.

I got up and washed my arm. 'Well, I know why your cow won't get up – she has a broken pelvis. Probably did it during the first night when she was staggering about with the milk fever. I should think the nerves are damaged, too. It's hopeless, I'm afraid.' Even though I was dispensing bad news it was a relief to come up with something rational.

Mr Handshaw stared at me. 'Hopeless? How's that?'

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but that's how it is. The only thing you can do is get her off to the butcher. She has no power in her hind legs. She'll never get up again.'

On hearing the dire prognosis, Mr Handshaw blows his top, points out all of James's shortcomings and the vet has no option but to leave. The whole thing is an unhappy episode for James although he feels certain of his diagnosis until he receives a phone call from Mr Handshaw the next day.

'Is that Mr Herriot? Aye, well, good mornin' to you. I'm just ringing to tell you that me cow's up on her legs and doing fine.'

I gripped the receiver tightly with both hands.

'What? What's that you say?'

‘I said me cow’s up. Found her walking about byre this morning, fit as a fiddle. You’d think there’d never been owt the matter with her.’ He paused for a few moments then spoke with grave deliberation like a disapproving schoolmaster. ‘And you stood there and looked at me and said she’d never get up n’more.’

‘But . . . but . . .’

‘Ah, you’re wondering how I did it? Well, I just happened to remember another old trick of me dad’s. I went round to t’butcher and got a fresh-killed sheep skin and put it on her back. Had her up in no time – you’ll ’ave to come round and see her. Wonderful man was me dad.’

Blindly I made my way into the dining room. I had to consult my boss about this. Siegfried’s sleep had been broken by a 3 a.m. calving and he looked a lot older than his thirty-odd years. He listened in silence as he finished his breakfast then pushed away his plate and poured a last cup of coffee. ‘Hard luck, James. The old sheep skin, eh? Funny thing – you’ve been in the Dales over a year now and never come across that one. Suppose it must be going out of fashion a bit now but you know it has a grain of sense behind it like a lot of these old remedies. You can imagine there’s a lot of heat generated under a fresh sheep skin and it acts like a great hot poultice on the back – really tickles them up after a while, and if a cow is lying there out of sheer cussedness she’ll often get up just to get rid of it.’

‘But damn it, how about the broken pelvis? I tell you it was creaking and wobbling all over the place!’

‘Well, James, you’re not the first to have been caught that way. Sometimes the pelvic ligaments don’t tighten up for a few days after calving and you get this effect.’

‘Oh God,’ I moaned, staring down at the tablecloth. ‘What a bloody mess I’ve made of the whole thing.’

‘Oh, you haven’t really.’ Siegfried lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. ‘That old cow was probably toying with the idea of getting up for a walk just when old Handshaw dumped the skin on her back. She could just as easily have done it after one of your injections and then you’d have got the credit. Don’t you remember what I told you when you first came here? There’s a very fine dividing line between looking a real smart vet on the one hand and an immortal fool on the other.’

The story with Mr Handshaw was inspired by a visit that Alf Wight made to a cow belonging to a local farmer, Billy Goodyear. Having been told by Alf that his cow would never get up, Billy ignored his advice, kept her alive and she eventually got to her feet. Billy never forgot the incident and five decades later, when an assistant from the Thirsk practice visited his farm, he was still bragging about it! ‘Downer’ cows are

something all veterinary surgeons come up against, even today. When working at the Thirsk practice, Jim Wight was frequently called out to attend to cows that wouldn't get up – they would usually end up at the knacker's yard after a week or so, but there was always the odd cow that would defy all scientific knowledge and suddenly get up after two or three weeks. Alf was happy to try the age-old methods and remedies of the farmers, sometimes to humour his clients or because he had nothing more scientific to offer.

Alf was also called out frequently to treat cows with mastitis, which can cause an udder to swell, redden or harden and in some cases emit a stinking serum-like liquid instead of milk. Expected to produce three or four gallons of milk a day, dairy cows are prone to the condition, which is caused by getting dirt on the end of a teat, perhaps by lying down in muck or when they are milked. In It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet, James pays a visit to a cow with acute mastitis, a condition vets often saw in the summer months when a cow had stopped milking and flies got onto the end of its teat. Modern vets can now administer antibiotics as soon as a cow dries off but in the 1930s and 1940s there was little vets could do other than cutting the teat off or drawing any liquid out by hand.

I got back into the car and looked at my list of visits; it was good to be back and the day passed quickly. It was about seven o'clock in the evening, when I thought I had finished, that I had a call from Terry Watson, a young farm worker who kept two cows of his own. One of them, he said, had summer mastitis. Mid-July was a bit early for this but in the later summer months we saw literally hundreds of these cases; in fact a lot of the farmers called it 'August bag'. It was an unpleasant condition because it was just about incurable and usually resulted in the cow losing a quarter (the area of the udder which supplies each teat with milk) and sometimes even her life.

Terry Watson's cow looked very sick. She had limped in from the field at milking time, swinging her right hind leg wide to keep it away from the painful udder, and now she stood trembling in her stall, her eyes staring anxiously in front of her. I drew gently at the affected teat and, instead of milk, a stream of dark, foul-smelling serum spurted into the tin can I was holding.

'No mistaking that stink, Terry,' I said. 'It's the real summer type all right.' I felt my way over the hot, swollen quarter and the cow lifted her leg quickly as I touched the tender tissue. 'Pretty hard, too. It looks bad, I'm afraid.'

The poor outlook for the cow comes as a blow to Terry Watson, a young man with a wife and baby, whose smallholding of two cows, a few pigs and hens provides him with a little extra income on top of a day's labouring. James injects the cow and tells Terry to strip the teat out, by working away at the udder every half-hour to draw out the stinking liquid, and then to bathe and massage it in warm water. Terry immediately grabs a milking stool and bucket and starts to massage straight away. The following

morning, James drops in and sees Terry in the same position and, amazingly, the cow looks far more comfortable.

I bent down by the udder, feeling carefully for the painful swelling of last night, but my hand came up against a smooth, yielding surface and in disbelief, I kneaded the tissue between my fingers. The animal showed no sign of discomfort. With a feeling of bewilderment I drew on the teat with thumb and forefinger; the quarter was nearly empty but I did manage to squeeze a single jet of pure white milk onto my palm.

'What's going on here, Terry? You must have switched cows on me. You're having me on, aren't you?'

'Nay, guvnor,' the young man said with his slow smile. 'It's same cow all right – she's better, that's all.'

'But it's impossible! What the devil have you done to her?'

'Just what you told me to do. Rub and strip.'

I scratched my head. 'But she's back to normal. I've never seen anything like it.'

'Aye, I know you haven't.' It was a woman's voice and I turned and saw young Mrs Watson standing at the door holding her baby. 'You've never seen a man that would rub and strip a cow right round the clock, have you?'

'Round the clock?' I said.

She looked at her husband with a mixture of concern and exasperation. 'Yes, he's been there on that stool since you left last night. Never been to bed, never been in for a meal. I've been bringing him bits and pieces and cups of tea. Great fool – it's enough to kill anybody.'

I looked at Terry and my eyes moved from the pallid face over the thin, slightly swaying body to the nearly empty bowl of goose grease at his feet. 'Good Lord, man,' I said. 'You've done the impossible but you must be about all in. Anyway, your cow is as good as new – you don't need to do another thing to her, so you can go in and have a bit of a rest.'

'Nay, I can't do that.' He shook his head and straightened his shoulders. 'I've got me work to go to and I'm late as it is.'

As Siegfried frequently tells James, veterinary work provides countless opportunities for practitioners to look like fools, and bovine care is no exception. The Sidlow family, as described in Chapter 6, already consider vets to be 'useless creatures . . . expensive

layabouts who really know nothing about animals or their diseases'. As a result, they only send for a vet when their animals are on the brink of death, often as a result of the black magic remedies they have tried first. James has the misfortune to be called to the Sidlow farm several times, where invariably something goes wrong or he has to assign a poor beast to the knacker's yard, which only confirms their conviction that vets are a menace to the animal population. When Mr Sidlow calls him in again to see a cow, James is yet again forced to leave the farm in disgrace.

A numbness filled me as we went into the byre. It continued as Mr Sidlow described how he had battled against this cow's recurring bouts of diarrhoea for several months; how he had started quietly with ground eggshells in gruel and worked up to his most powerful remedy, blue vitriol and dandelion tea, but all to no avail. I hardly heard him because it was fairly obvious at a glance that the cow had Jöhne's disease.

Nobody could be quite sure, of course, but the animal's advanced emaciation, especially in the hind end, and the stream of bubbly, foetid scour which she had ejected as I walked in were almost diagnostic. Instinctively I grasped her tail and thrust my thermometer into the rectum: I wasn't much interested in her temperature but it gave me a couple of minutes to think.

However, in this instance I got only about five seconds because, without warning, the thermometer disappeared from my fingers. Some sudden suction had drawn it inside the cow. I ran my fingers round just inside the rectum – nothing; I pushed my hand inside without success; with a feeling of rising panic I rolled up my sleeve and groped about in vain.

There was nothing else for it – I had to ask for a bucket of hot water, soap and a towel and strip off as though preparing for some large undertaking. Over my thirty-odd years in practice I can recall many occasions when I looked a complete fool, but there is a peculiarly piercing quality about the memory of myself, bare to the waist, the centre of a ring of hostile stares, guddling frantically inside that cow. At the time, all I could think of was that this was the Sidlow place; anything could happen here. In my mental turmoil I had discarded all my knowledge of pathology and anatomy and could visualize the little glass tube working its way rapidly along the intestinal tract until it finally pierced some vital organ. There was another hideous image of myself carrying out a major operation, a full-scale laparotomy on the cow to recover my thermometer.

It is difficult to describe the glorious relief which flooded through me when at last I felt the thing between my fingers; I pulled it out, filthy and dripping, and stared down stupidly at the graduations on the tube.

Mr Sidlow cleared his throat. 'Well, wot does it say? Has she got a temperature?'

I whipped round and gave him a piercing look. Was it possible that this man could be

making a joke? But the dark, tight-shut face was expressionless.

‘No,’ I mumbled in reply. ‘No temperature.’

The farming industry saw many changes in the years that James worked as a veterinary surgeon, particularly in the small dairy farms in the area. When Alf first worked in Thirsk, the practice had around seventy to eighty dairy farms but after the war, small farms struggled to survive and were gradually subsumed into industrial-size farms where large herds of cows were milked by machines in modern milking parlours. Today there are just two dairy farms in the Thirsk practice. In Vet in a Spin James is called to Mr Blackburn’s new big dairy farm to take a look at one of their cows in labour, and he finds the concrete surroundings less than welcoming.

I think it was the early-morning calls in the winter which were the worst. It was a fairly common experience to be walking sleepy-eyed into a cow byre at 6 a.m. for a calving but at Mr Blackburn’s farm there was a difference. In fact several differences.

Firstly, there was usually an anxious-faced farmer to greet me with news of how the calf was coming, when labour had started, but today I was like an unwelcome stranger. Secondly, I had grown accustomed to the sight of a few cows tied up in a cobbled byre with wooden partitions and an oil lamp, and now I was gazing down a long avenue of concrete under blazing electric light with a seemingly endless succession of bovine backsides protruding from tubular metal standings. Thirdly, instead of the early-morning peace there was a clattering of buckets, the rhythmic pulsing of a milking machine and the blaring of a radio loudspeaker. There was also a frantic scurrying of white-coated, white-capped men, but none of them paid the slightest attention to me.

This was one of the new big dairy farms. In place of a solitary figure on a milk stool, head buried in the cow’s side, pulling forth the milk with a gentle ‘hiss-hiss’ there was this impersonal hustle and bustle.

James catches Mr Blackburn, who is hurrying past, and asks him to point him in the direction of the calving cow. He discovers that no one has had time to check on the cow as the staff have been too busy milking the other cows, ready for the collection of the churns by the big dairy companies. James therefore must examine the cow alone, treat it for milk fever, and then birth its calf without any help.

I filled a bucket, found a piece of soap and threw a towel over my shoulder. When I reached my patient I looked in vain for some sign of a name. So many of the cows of those days had their names printed above their stalls but there were no Marigolds, Alices or Snowdrops here, just numbers.

Before taking off my jacket I looked casually in the ear where the tattoo marks stood

out plainly against the creamy white surface. She was number eighty-seven.

Alf similarly preferred working on the small farms, where he could build up relationships with the farmers and their animals. In the first years after the war, there were still plenty of small farmsteads that retained the old traditions, including giving names to their livestock. Some farmers, however, such as the Rowney brothers in The Lord God Made Them All, come up with some unusual names for their herd of cows.

I recall a visit I made to test the herd of Rupe and Will Rowney. Rupe and Will just didn't get on. They were bachelor brothers who had run a dairy farm for many years together but they didn't seem to be able to agree about anything.

Visits there could be embarrassing as the brothers argued continually and criticized each other's every move, but on this particular day I found they had forgotten to keep the cows in for me.

I stood to one side as they castigated each other.

'Ah told ye the postcard said today.'

'Naw, ye didn't, ye said Tuesday. It was me as said today.'

'Well, fetch the bloody card from t'house and let's 'ave another look at it.'

'How can I? Ye burned it, ye daft bugger!'

I let the debate go on for a few minutes, then intervened tactfully.

'It's all right,' I said. 'There's no harm done. The cows are just there in the field. It shouldn't take long to get them in.'

Rupe gave his brother a final glare and turned to me. 'Nay, it won't take long, Mr Herriot. The byre door's open. Ah'll soon call 'em in.'

He inflated his lungs and began a series of shrill cries. 'Come on, Spotty Nose, come on, Big Lugs, come on, Mucky Tail, come on, Fat Tits, come on, Fuzzy Top!'

Will, nettled at being upstaged, broke in with his own shout. 'Come on, Long Legs! Come on, Slow Coach!'

Rupe froze him with a stare then bent towards me. 'Ye'll have to excuse me brother, Mr Herriot,' he said in a confidential whisper. 'Ah've tried to tell 'im many a time, but he will call the cows them daft names.'

Alongside the many cows James treats, bulls are also regular patients. In Vet in Harness, the young vet heads to Mr Dacre's farm to conduct a tuberculin test on his bull, Bill. The test consists of injecting tuberculin into the animal's skin and then measuring any swelling around the injection site after seventy-two hours – and any infected animal must be slaughtered. James has no concerns about Mr Dacre's bull on this front – instead, he is more concerned about his own safety.

'Move over, Bill!' Mr Dacre cried some time later as he tweaked the big bull's tail.

Nearly every farmer kept a bull in those days and they were all called Billy or Bill. I suppose it was because this was a very mature animal that he received the adult version. Being a docile beast he responded to the touch on his tail by shuffling his great bulk to one side, leaving me enough space to push in between him and the wooden partition against which he was tied by a chain.

I was reading a tuberculin test and all I wanted to do was to measure the intradermal reaction. I had to open my calipers very wide to take in the thickness of the skin on the enormous neck.

'Thirty,' I called out to the farmer.

He wrote the figure down on the testing book and laughed.

'By heck, he's got some pelt on 'im.'

'Yes,' I said, beginning to squeeze my way out. 'But he's a big fellow, isn't he?'

Just how big he was was brought home to me immediately because the bull suddenly swung round, pinning me against the partition. Cows did this regularly and I moved them by bracing my back against whatever was behind me and pushing them away. But it was different with Bill.

Gasping, I pushed with all my strength against the rolls of fat which covered the vast roan-coloured flank, but I might as well have tried to shift a house.

The farmer dropped his book and seized the tail again but this time the bull showed no response. There was no malice in his behaviour – he was simply having a comfortable lean against the boards and I don't suppose he even noticed the morsel of puny humanity wriggling frantically against his ribcage.

Still, whether he meant it or not, the end result was the same; I was having the life crushed out of me. Pop-eyed, groaning, scarcely able to breathe, I struggled with everything I had, but I couldn't move an inch. And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, Bill started to rub himself up and down against the partition. So that

was what he had come round for; he had an itch and he just wanted to scratch it.

The effect on me was catastrophic. I was certain my internal organs were being steadily ground to pulp and as I thrashed about in complete panic the huge animal leaned even more heavily.

I don't like to think what would have happened if the wood behind me had not been old and rotten, but just as I felt my senses leaving me there was a cracking and splintering and I fell through into the next stall. Lying there like a stranded fish on a bed of shattered timbers I looked up at Mr Dacre, waiting till my lungs started to work again.

The farmer, having got over his first alarm, was rubbing his upper lip vigorously in a polite attempt to stop himself laughing. His little girl who had watched the whole thing from her vantage point in one of the hay racks had no such inhibitions. Screaming with delight, she pointed at me.

'Ooo, Dad, Dad, look at that man! Did you see him, Dad, did you see him? Ooo what a funny man!' She went into helpless convulsions. She was only about five but I had a feeling she would remember my performance all her life.

At length I picked myself up and managed to brush the matter off lightly, but after I had driven a mile or so from the farm I stopped the car and looked myself over. My ribs ached pretty uniformly as though a light road roller had passed over them and there was a tender area on my left buttock where I had landed on my calipers but otherwise I seemed to have escaped damage. I removed a few spicules of wood from my trousers, got back into the car and consulted my list of visits.

On cattle farms, the main job of a bull is to breed with cows and any innovations brought in to help with this were greeted enthusiastically by veterinary surgeons and farmers alike. Artificial insemination revolutionized the breeding of cattle although the vets' first experience with an artificial vagina – as related in The Lord God Made Them All – doesn't quite go to plan.

The bull with the bowler hat.

That was one of the irreverent terms for artificial insemination when it first arrived on the post-war scene. Of course AI was a wonderful advance. Up till the official licensing of bulls the farmers had used any available male bovine to get their cows in calf. A cow had to produce a calf before it would give milk and it was milk that was the goal of the dairy farmers, but unfortunately the progeny of these 'scrub' bulls were often low grade and weakly.

But AI was a great improvement on licensing. To use a high-class, pedigree, proven

bull to inseminate large numbers of cows for farmers who could never afford to own such an animal was and is a splendid idea. Over the years I have seen countless thousands of superior young heifers, bullocks and bulls populate the farms of Britain and I have rejoiced.

I am speaking theoretically, however. My own practical experience of artificial insemination was brief and unhappy.

When the thing first began, most practitioners thought they would be rushing about, doing a lot of insemination on their own account, and Siegfried and I could hardly wait to get started. We purchased an artificial vagina, which was a tube of hard vulcanized rubber about eighteen inches long with a lining of latex. There was a little tap on the tube and warm water was run into this to simulate the temperature of a genuine bovine vagina. On one end of the AV was a latex cone secured by rubber bands and this cone terminated in a glass tube in which the semen was collected.

Apart from its use in insemination this instrument provided an excellent means of testing the farmers' own bulls for fertility. It was in this context that I had my first experience.

Wally Hartley had brought a young Ayrshire bull from one of the big dairy farmers and he wanted the animal's fertility tested by the new method. He rang me to ask if I would do the job and I was elated at the chance to try out our new acquisition.

At the farm I filled the liner with water just nicely at blood heat and fastened on the cone and glass tube. I was ready and eager for action.

The required cow in oestrus was in a large loose box off the yard and the farmer led the bull towards it.

'He's nobbut a little 'un,' Mr Hartley said, 'but I wouldn't trust 'im. He's a cheeky young bugger. Never served a cow yet, but keen as mustard.'

I eyed the bull. Certainly he wasn't large, but he had mean eyes and the sharp curving horns of the typical Ayrshire. Anyway, this job shouldn't be much trouble. I had never seen it done but had flipped through a pamphlet on the subject and it seemed simple enough.

All you did was wait till the bull started to mount, then you directed the protruded penis into the AV. Apparently then, the bull, with surprising gullibility, thrust happily into the water-filled cylinder and ejaculated into the tube. I had been told repeatedly that there was nothing to it.

I went into the box. 'Let him in, Wally,' I said, and the farmer opened the half door.

The bull trotted inside, and the cow, fastened by a halter to a ring on the wall, submitted calmly as he sniffed around her. He seemed to like what he saw because he finally stationed himself behind her with eager anticipation.

This was the moment. Take up position on the right side of the bull, the pamphlet had said, and the rest would be easy.

With surprising speed the young animal threw his forelegs on the cow's rump and surged forward. I had to move quickly and as the penis emerged from the sheath I grabbed it and poised the AV for action.

But I didn't get the chance. The bull dismounted immediately and swung round on me with an affronted glare. He looked me carefully up and down as though he didn't quite believe what he saw and there was not an ounce of friendliness in his expression. Then he appeared to remember the rather pressing business on hand and turned his attention to the cow again.

He leaped up, I grabbed, and once more he suspended his activities abruptly and brought his forefeet thudding to the ground. This time there was more than outraged dignity in his eyes, there was anger. He snorted, shook the needle-sharp horns in my direction and dragged a little straw along the floor with a hoof before fixing me with a long appraising stare. He didn't have to speak, his message was unequivocal. Just try that once more, chum, and you've had it.

As his eyes lingered on me everything seemed to become silent and motionless as though I were part of a picture. The cow standing patiently, the churned straw beneath the animals, and beyond them the farmer out in the yard, leaning over the half door, waiting for the next move.

I wasn't particularly looking forward to that next move. I felt a little breathless and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth.

At length the bull, with a final warning glance at me, decided to resume his business and reared up on the cow once more. I gulped, bent quickly and as his slim red organ shot forth I grasped it and tried to bring the AV down on it.

This time the bull didn't mess about. He sprang away from the cow, put his head down and came at me like a bullet.

In that fleeting instant I realized what a fool I had been to stand with the animals between me and the door. Behind me was the dark corner of the box. I was trapped.

Fortunately the AV was dangling from my right hand and as the bull charged I was

able to catch him an upward blow on the snout. If I had hit him on the top of the head he would never have felt it and one or both of those nasty horns would inevitably have started to explore my interior. But as it was, the hard rubber cylinder thumping against his nose brought him to a slithering halt, and while he was blinking and making up his mind about having a second go I rained blows on him with a frenzy born of terror.

I have often wondered since that day if I am the only veterinary surgeon to have used an artificial vagina as a defensive weapon. It certainly was not built for the purpose because it soon began to disintegrate under my onslaught. First the glass tube hurtled past the ear of the startled farmer who was watching, wide-eyed, from the doorway, then the cone spun away against the flank of the cow, who had started to chew her cud placidly, oblivious of the drama being enacted by her side.

I alternated my swipes with thrusts and lunges worthy of a fencing master but I still couldn’t jockey my way out of that corner. However, although my puny cylinder couldn’t hurt the bull I obviously had him puzzled. Apart from a lot of weaving and prodding with his horns he made no sign of repeating his first headlong charge and seemed content to keep me penned in the few feet of space.

But I knew it was only a matter of time. He was out to get me and I was wondering how it felt to receive a cornada when he took a step back and came in again full tilt, head down.

I met him with a back-handed slash, and that was what saved me because the elastic holding the latex lining came off and the warm water from within fountained into the bull’s eyes.

He stopped suddenly and it was then I think he just decided to give up. In his experience of humans I was something new to him. I had taken intimate liberties with him in the pursuit of his lawful duty, I had belaboured him with a rubber instrument and finally squirted water in his face. He had plainly had enough of me.

During his pause for thought I dodged past him, threw open the door and escaped into the yard.