This was my third spring in the Dales but it was like the two before – and all the springs after. The kind of spring, that is, that a country vet knows; the din of the lambing pens, the bass rumble of the ewes and the high, insistent bawling of the lambs. This, for me, has always heralded the end of winter and the beginning of something new. This and the piercing Yorkshire wind and the hard, bright sunshine flooding the bare hillsides.

At the top of the grassy slope the pens, built of straw bales, formed a long row of square cubicles each holding a ewe with her lambs and I could see Rob Benson coming round the far end carrying two feeding buckets. Rob was hard at it; at this time of the year he didn't go to bed for about six weeks; he would maybe take off his boots and doze by the kitchen fire at night but he was his own shepherd and never very far from the scene of action.

'Ah've got a couple of cases for you today, Jim.' His face, cracked and purpled by the weather, broke into a grin. 'It's not really you ah need, it's that little lady's hand of yours and right sharpish, too.'

Lambing time marks not only the end of a long harsh winter but the start of the busiest period in the year for a veterinary surgeon. Just as sheep farmers like Rob Benson can hardly sleep during the weeks of lambing, so too are veterinary surgeons dragged from their beds on a nightly basis to attend to the tidal wave of lambing. For ten months of the year, sheep hardly figure in a vet's calendar: they are, as James Herriot puts it, just 'woolly things on the hills', but for the other two months, from around March to May, they're almost all vets can think about.

To add to their busy schedule, other animals are also at a low ebb in spring: cattle have been confined in their byres all winter and their calves have little resistance to disease. Despite the relentless work, Alf Wight enjoyed this time of year and often said lambing ewes was easily his favourite job as 'it had all the thrill and interest of calving without the hard labour'. He became very adept at it – once lambing sixteen ewes in just one afternoon – his small hands enabling him gently to ease out lambs. It's for this reason that Rob Benson calls for the services of James, knowing that only he can help his distressed ewe.

He led the way to a bigger enclosure, holding several sheep. There was a scurry as we went in but he caught expertly at the fleece of a darting ewe. 'This is the first one. You can see we haven't a deal o' time.'

I lifted the woolly tail and gasped. The lamb's head was protruding from the vagina, the lips of the vulva clamped tightly behind the ears, and it had swollen enormously to more than twice its size. The eyes were mere puffed slits in the great oedematous ball and the tongue, blue and engorged, lolled from the mouth.

'Well I've seen a few big heads, Rob, but I think this takes the prize.'

'Aye, the little beggar came with his legs back. Just beat me to it. Ah was only away for an hour but he was up like a football. By hell it doesn't take long. I know he wants his legs bringin' round but what can I do with bloody great mitts like mine.' He held out his huge hands, rough and swollen with the years of work.

While he spoke I was stripping off my jacket and as I rolled my shirtsleeves high the wind struck like a knife at my shrinking flesh. I soaped my fingers quickly and began to feel for a space round the lamb's neck. For a moment the little eyes opened and regarded me disconsolately.

'He's alive, anyway,' I said. 'But he must feel terrible and he can't do a thing about it.'

Easing my way round, I found a space down by the throat where I thought I might get through. This was where my 'lady's hand' came in useful and I blessed it every spring; I could work inside the ewes with the minimum of discomfort to them and this was all-important because sheep, despite their outdoor hardiness, just won't stand rough treatment.

With the utmost care I inched my way along the curly wool of the neck to the shoulder. Another push forward and I was able to hook a finger round the leg and draw it forward until I could feel the flexure of the knee; a little more twiddling and I had hold of the tiny cloven foot and drew it gently out into the light of day.

With farm animals, vets are usually called in to deal with problem births – those that farmers cannot handle themselves. Lambs are often born in twos or threes, which can result in a jumble of heads and legs which a vet must untangle and ease out as gently as possible. A large, single lamb can also prove challenging if it gets stuck in its mother's pelvis, and there's no extra room for a vet's hand – in which case some vets would put a bit of string around the lamb's head and ease the lamb out by pulling on the string. Alf Wight, as the subsequent story shows, had a different method.

Dealing with various complications meant that lambing could take time, although it was invariably undertaken in the open fields, often with just the aid of cold water and a meagre bit of soap, exposed to the biting Yorkshire wind and rain. For Alf Wight the rewards, however, outweighed the hardships and years later in the late 1970s he wrote: 'Delivering these uniquely appealing little creatures is an unfailing joy and the

charm of seeing them struggling to their feet while the mother “talks” to them has never grown dim for me.’

In Every Living Thing James must attend to a difficult lambing on a particularly bitter day, where there is snow still on the ground.

I wondered if there was any chance of the ewe being under cover. In the early fifties, it didn’t seem to occur to many of the farmers to bring their lambing ewes into the buildings and I attended to the great majority out in the open fields. There were happy times when I almost chuckled in relief at the sight of a row of hurdles in a warm fold yard or sometimes the farmers would build pens from stacked-up straw bales, but on this occasion my spirits plummeted when I drew up at the farm and met Mr Walton who came out of the house carrying a bucket of water and headed for the gate. ‘Outside, is she?’ I asked, trying to sound airy.

‘Aye, just ower there.’ He pointed over the long, bracken-splashed pasture to a prone woolly form in the distance which looked a hell of a long way ‘ower there’. As I trailed across the frosty grass, my medical bag and obstetric overall dangling, a merciless wind tore at me, picking up an extra Siberian cold from the long drifts of snow which still lay behind the walls in this late Yorkshire spring.

As I stripped off and knelt behind the ewe I looked around. We were right on top of the world and the panorama of hills and valleys with grey farmhouses and pebbled rivers in their depths was beautiful but would have been more inviting if it had been a warm summer afternoon and me preparing for a picnic with my family.

I held out my hand and the farmer deposited a tiny sliver of soap on my palm. I always felt that farmers kept special pieces of soap for the vet – minute portions of scrubbing soap which were too small and hard to be of any use. I rubbed this piece frantically with my hands, dipping frequently into the water, but I could work up only the most meagre film of lather. Not enough to protect my tender arm as I inserted it into the ewe, and the farmer looked at me enquiringly as I softly ooh’d and aah’d my way towards the cervix.

I found just what I didn’t want to find. A big single lamb, jammed tight. Two lambs are the norm and three quite common, but a big single lamb often spells trouble. It was one of my joys in practice to sort out the tangles of twins and triplets but with the singles it was a case of not enough room and the big lamb had to be eased and pulled out as gently as possible – a long and tedious business. Also, often the single lamb was dead through pressure and had to be removed by embryotomy or a caesarean operation.

Resigning myself to the fact that I was going to spend a long time crouched on that windy hilltop, I reached as far as possible and poked a finger into the lamb’s mouth,

feeling a surge of relief as the little tongue stirred against my hand. He was alive, anyway, and with a lifting of my spirits I began the familiar ritual of introducing lubricating jelly, locating the tiny legs and fastening them with snares and, finally, as I sat back on my heels for a breather I knew that all I had to do now was to bring the head through the pelvis. That was the tricky bit. If it came through I was home and dry; if it didn't I was in trouble. Mr Walton, holding back the wool from the vulva, watched me in silence. Despite his lifetime experience with sheep he was helpless in a case like this because, like most farmers, he had huge, work-roughened hands with fingers like bananas and could not possibly have got inside a ewe. My small 'lady's hand' as they called it was a blessing.

I hooked my forefinger into the eye socket – my favourite trick, there was nothing else to get hold of except the lower jaw which was dangerously fragile – and began to pull with infinite care. The ewe strained, crushing my hand against the pelvic bones – not as bad as in a cow but painful, and my mouth opened wide as I eased and twisted and pulled until, with a blessed surge, the head slipped through the bony pelvic opening.

It wasn't long, then, until feet, legs and nose appeared at the vulva and I brought the little creature out onto the grass. He lay still for a moment, snuffling at the cold world he had entered, then he shook his head vigorously. I smiled. That was the best sign of all.

I had another wrestle with the morsel of soap, then the farmer wordlessly handed me a piece of sacking to dry my arms. This was quite common in those days. Towels were scarce commodities on the farms and I couldn't blame the farmers' wives for hesitating to send out a clean towel to a man who had just had his arms up the back end of an animal. An old soiled one was the usual and, if not, the hessian sack was always at hand. I couldn't rub my painful arms with the coarse material and contented myself with a careful patting, before pushing them, still damp, into the sleeves of my jacket.

The ewe, hearing a high-pitched call from her lamb, began to talk back with the soft deep baa I knew so well, and as she got up and began an intensive licking of the little creature I stood there, forgetful of the cold, listening to their conversation, enthralled as ever by the miracle of birth. When the lamb, apparently feeling he was wasting time, struggled to his feet and tottered unsteadily round to the milk bar I grinned in satisfaction and made my way back to the car.

While for much of the year, sheep can be left to their own devices, pigs represent year-round work for James and Siegfried. In the 1930s and 1940s nearly all working people in Yorkshire kept a pig or two, so they'd be self-sufficient in the local staple of ham and fatty bacon. Many farms kept dairy cattle and sheep along with pigs, hens and perhaps a few goats, while townsfolk would keep pigs in gardens or yards often in ramshackle tin sheds.

In If Only They Could Talk, Siegfried decides they too must keep a few pigs, alongside the mare he already stables in the yard, with some hens at the bottom of the garden. Not only would they save a bit of money – always an attractive proposition to Siegfried – but the scheme would also give his work-shy younger brother Tristan something to do.

He put down his cup with a clatter. ‘You know, there’s no reason why we should have to go to the grocer for our bacon and eggs. There’s a perfectly good henhouse at the bottom of the garden and a pigsty in the yard with a boiler for the swill. All our household waste could go towards feeding a pig. We’d probably do it quite cheaply.’

He rounded on Tristan who had just lit a Woodbine and was shaking out his Mirror with the air of ineffable pleasure which was peculiar to him. ‘And it would be a useful job for you. You’re not producing much sitting around here on your arse all day. A bit of stock keeping would do you good.’

Once Siegfried decides to do something he doesn’t muck about and within forty-eight hours ten little pigs have taken up residence in the yard and twelve light Sussex pullet hens are pecking about in the henhouse. Tristan, however, does not share his brother’s enthusiasm for the scheme and, under his half-hearted care, the hens fail to produce any eggs over the subsequent weeks and frequently escape in search of substance. Eventually, much to Siegfried’s irritation, he accepts the hens must go, ranting at Tristan: ‘I must have been mad to think that any hens under your care would ever lay eggs . . . Not one solitary egg have we seen. The bloody hens are flying about the countryside like pigeons.’ He gives them away to Mrs Dale, a pensioner down the road, who just a fortnight later informs Siegfried she’s getting ten eggs a day from them, as he bellows at Tristan: ‘Ten eggs, do you hear, ten eggs!’

Fortunately, Tristan finds the piglets more interesting and is frequently found resting his elbows on the sty door watching them gobbling their swill or conducting conferences with old Boardman who considers himself something of expert in pig husbandry. Before long the piglets grow into ten solid, no-nonsense porkers and in the process lose much of their charm. At the rattle of the swill bucket, they squeal loudly, and Tristan has to brandish a heavy stick before he dares enter the sty, plunging himself among the grunting, jostling animals. On one fateful day, however, they too, like the hens, make a break for liberty.

It was on a market day when the pigs had almost reached bacon weight that I came upon Tristan sprawled in his favourite chair. But there was something unusual about him; he wasn’t asleep, no medicine bottle, no Woodbines, no Daily Mirror. His arms hung limply over the sides of the chair, his eyes were half closed and sweat glistened on his forehead.

‘Jim,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve had the most hellish afternoon I’ve ever had in my life.’

I was alarmed at his appearance. ‘What’s happened?’

‘The pigs,’ he croaked. ‘They escaped today.’

‘Escaped! How the devil could they do that?’

Tristan tugged at his hair. ‘It was when I was feeding the mare. I gave her her hay and thought I might as well feed the pigs at the same time. You know what they’ve been like lately – well, today they went berserk. Soon as I opened the door they charged out in a solid block. Sent me up in the air, bucket and all, then ran over the top of me.’ He shuddered and looked up at me wide-eyed. ‘I’ll tell you this, Jim, when I was lying there on the cobbles, covered with swill and that lot trampling on me, I thought it was all over. But they didn’t savage me. They belted out through the yard door at full gallop.’

‘The yard door was open then?’

‘Too true it was. I would just choose this day to leave it open.’

Tristan sat up and wrung his hands. ‘Well, you know, I thought it was all right at first. You see, they slowed down when they got into the lane and trotted quietly round into the front street with Boardman and me hard on their heels. They formed a group there. Didn’t seem to know where to go next. I was sure we were going to be able to head them off, but just then one of them caught sight of itself in Robson’s shop window.’

He gave a remarkable impression of a pig staring at its reflection for a few moments then leaping back with a startled grunt.

‘Well, that did it, Jim. The bloody animal panicked and shot off into the market place at about fifty miles an hour with the rest after it.’

I gasped. Ten large pigs loose among the packed stalls and market-day crowds was difficult even to imagine.

‘Oh God, you should have seen it.’ Tristan fell back wearily into his chair. ‘Women and kids screaming. The stallholders, police and everybody else cursing me. There was a terrific traffic jam too – miles of cars tooting like hell while the policeman on point duty concentrated on browbeating me.’ He wiped his brow. ‘You know that fast-talking merchant on the china stall – well, today I saw him at a loss for words. He was balancing a cup on his palm and in full cry when one of the pigs got its forefeet on his stall and stared him straight in the face. He stopped as if he’d been shot. Any other

time it would have been funny but I thought the perishing animal was going to wreck the stall. The counter was beginning to rock when the pig changed its mind and made off.'

'What's the position now?' I asked. 'Have you got them back?'

'I've got nine of them back,' Tristan replied, leaning back and closing his eyes. 'With the help of almost the entire male population of the district I've got nine of them back. The tenth was last seen heading north at a good pace. God knows where it is now. Oh, I didn't tell you – one of them got into the post office. Spent quite some time in there.' He put his hands over his face. 'I'm for it this time, Jim. I'll be in the hands of the law after this lot. There's no doubt about it.'

I leaned over and slapped his leg. 'Oh, I shouldn't worry. I don't suppose there's been any serious damage done.'

Tristan replied with a groan. 'But there's something else. When I finally closed the door after getting the pigs back in their sty I was on the verge of collapse. I was leaning against the wall gasping for breath when I saw the mare had gone. Yes, gone. I'd gone straight out after the pigs and forgot to close her box. I don't know where she is. Boardman said he'd look around – I haven't the strength.'

Tristan lit a trembling Woodbine. 'This is the end, Jim. Siegfried will have no mercy this time.'

As he spoke, the door flew open and his brother rushed in. 'What the hell is going on?' he roared. 'I've just been speaking to the vicar and he says my mare is in his garden eating his wallflowers. He's hopping mad and I don't blame him. Go on, you lazy young scoundrel. Don't lie there, get over to the vicarage this instant and bring her back!'

Tristan did not stir. He lay inert, looking up at his brother. His lips moved feebly.

'No,' he said.

'What's that?' Siegfried shouted incredulously. 'Get out of that chair immediately. Go and get that mare!'

'No,' replied Tristan.

I felt a chill of horror. This sort of mutiny was unprecedented. Siegfried had gone very red in the face and I steeled myself for an eruption; but it was Tristan who spoke. 'If you want your mare you can get her yourself.' His voice was quiet with no note of defiance. He had the air of a man to whom the future is of no account.

Even Siegfried could see that this was one time when Tristan had had enough. After glaring down at his brother for a few seconds he turned and walked out. He got the mare himself.

Nothing more was said about the incident but the pigs were moved hurriedly to the bacon factory and were never replaced. The stock-keeping project was at an end.

Tristan is not alone being wary of pigs – sows can grow into enormous, formidable beasts, and can become especially aggressive when their piglets require treatment. Alf Wight's son Jim frequently joined his father on visits to treat pigs and keenly remembers the cacophony of squealing piglets and the terror of a huge sow roaring towards him. It's no surprise that smallholders were frequently injured by their pigs and Jim soon learned to seek out an escape route whenever he entered a pen. Alf, however, showed little fear, although often he armed himself with a board or an old broom if he needed to inject a sow. In If Only They Could Talk, Tristan has another run-in with a pig, this time an enormous sow with a swollen ear which Siegfried sends him to treat.

'All right,' he said suddenly. 'It's maybe just as well you are staying. I want you to do a job for me. You can open that haematoma on Charlie Dent's pig's ear.'

This was a bombshell. Charlie Dent's pig's ear was something we didn't talk about.

A few weeks earlier, Siegfried himself had gone to the smallholding halfway along a street on the outskirts of the town to see a pig with a swollen ear. It was an aural haematoma and the only treatment was to lance it, but, for some reason, Siegfried had not done the job but had sent me the following day.

I had wondered about it, but not for long. When I climbed into the sty, the biggest sow I had ever seen rose from the straw, gave an explosive bark and rushed at me with its huge mouth gaping. I didn't stop to argue. I made the wall about six inches ahead of the pig and vaulted over into the passage. I stood there, considering the position, looking thoughtfully at the mean little red eyes, the slavering mouth with its long, yellow teeth.

Usually, I paid no attention when pigs barked and grumbled at me but this one really seemed to mean it. As I wondered what the next step would be, the pig gave an angry roar, reared up on its hind legs and tried to get over the wall at me. I made up my mind quickly.

'I'm afraid I haven't got the right instrument with me, Mr Dent. I'll pop back another day and open the ear for you. It's nothing serious – only a small job. Goodbye.'

There the matter had rested, with nobody caring to mention it till now.

Tristan is aghast but Siegfried insists the job must be done before the younger brother heads off to a village dance that evening. Like Siegfried and James, Tristan comes up with endless excuses to get out of the dreaded task, returning to the house and claiming he can't find the address, then the family are out, and finally that it's too dark in the sty. Siegfried is having none of it – 'Don't give me any more of your bloody excuses . . . Now get the hell out of here and don't come back until it's done!' Tristan has no choice but to face the terrifying beast and James waits with anticipation for his return.

A moment later, the man of destiny entered but the penetrating smell of pig got into the room just ahead of him, and as he walked over to the fire, pungent waves seemed to billow round him. Pig muck was splattered freely over his nice suit, and on his clean collar, his face and hair. There was a great smear of the stuff on the seat of his trousers but despite his ravaged appearance he still maintained his poise.

Siegfried pushed his chair back hurriedly but did not change expression.

'Have you got that ear opened?' he asked quietly.

'Yes.'

Siegfried returned to his book without comment. It seemed that the matter was closed and Tristan, after staring briefly at his brother's bent head, turned and marched from the room. But even after he had gone, the odour of the pigsty hung in the room like a cloud.

Later, in the Drovers', I watched Tristan draining his third pint. He had changed, and if he didn't look as impressive as when he started the evening, at least he was clean and hardly smelled at all. I had said nothing yet, but the old light was returning to his eye. I went over to the bar and ordered my second half and Tristan's fourth pint and, as I set the glasses on the table, I thought that perhaps it was time.

'Well, what happened?'

Tristan took a long, contented pull at his glass and lit a Woodbine. 'Well now, all in all, Jim, it was rather a smooth operation, but I'll start at the beginning. You can imagine me standing all alone outside the sty in the pitch darkness with that bloody great pig grunting and growling on the other side of the wall. I didn't feel so good, I can tell you.

'I shone my torch on the thing's face and it jumped up and ran at me, making a noise like a lion and showing all those dirty yellow teeth. I nearly wrapped it up and came home there and then, but I got to thinking about the dance and all and, on the spur of the moment, I hopped over the wall.

‘Two seconds later, I was on my back. It must have charged me but couldn’t see enough to get a bite in. I just heard a bark, then a terrific weight against my legs and I was down.

‘Well, it’s a funny thing, Jim. You know I’m not a violent chap, but as I lay there, all my fears vanished and all I felt was a cold hatred of that bloody animal. I saw it as the cause of all my troubles and before I knew what I was doing I was up on my feet and booting its arse round and round the sty. And, do you know, it showed no fight at all. That pig was a coward at heart.’

I was still puzzled. ‘But the ear – how did you manage to open the haematoma?’

‘No problem, Jim. That was done for me.’

‘You don’t mean to say . . .’

‘Yes,’ Tristan said, holding his pint up to the light and studying a small foreign body floating in the depths. ‘Yes, it was really very fortunate. In the scuffle in the dark, the pig ran up against the wall and burst the thing itself. Made a beautiful job.’

In It Shouldn’t Happen to a Vet, James visits hotel landlord Mr Worley who keeps Tamworth pigs, including a huge sow Queenie and her litter of piglets. As Mr Worley gently croons in Queenie’s ear, James applies ointment to an overgrown claw and sensitive foot. Once that’s done, Mr Worley thanks James profusely, almost as if he has saved the animal’s life, and James sets out to leave.

We went out into what was really the back yard of an inn. Because Mr Worley wasn’t a regular farmer, he was the landlord of the Langthorpe Falls Hotel and his precious livestock were crammed into what had once been the stables and coach houses of the inn. They were all Tamworths and whichever door you opened you found yourself staring into the eyes of ginger-haired pigs; there were a few porkers and the odd one being fattened for bacon but Mr Worley’s pride was his sows. He had six of them – Queenie, Princess, Ruby, Marigold, Delilah and Primrose.

For years expert farmers had been assuring Mr Worley that he’d never do any good with his sows. If you were going in for breeding, they said, you had to have proper premises; it wasn’t a bit of use shoving sows into converted buildings like this. And for years Mr Worley’s sows had responded by producing litters of unprecedented size and raising them with tender care. They were all good mothers and didn’t savage their families or crush them clumsily under their bodies so it turned out with uncanny regularity that at the end of eight weeks Mr Worley had around twelve chunky weaners to take to market.

It must have spoiled the farmers' beer – none of them could equal that, and the pill was all the more bitter because the landlord had come from the industrial West Riding – Halifax, I think it was – a frail, short-sighted little retired newsagent with no agricultural background. By all the laws he just didn't have a chance.

Mr Worley makes his living from running a hotel but it's clear his pigs are his number one priority. He delights in welcoming James into the bar of the hotel, bringing up a tall jug from the cellar, before exclaiming: 'Well now, let's have a piggy talk!' and they go on to discuss swine fever, brine poisoning and various aspects of pig husbandry, while pictures of his sows with show rosettes look down at them from the walls.

His devotion resulted in my being called out frequently for very trivial things and I swore freely under my breath when I heard his voice on the other end of the line at one o'clock one morning.

'Marigold pigged this afternoon, Mr Herriot, and I don't think she's got much milk. Little pigs look very hungry to me. Will you come?'

I groaned my way out of bed and downstairs and through the long garden to the yard. By the time I had got the car out into the lane I had begun to wake up and when I rolled up to the inn was able to greet Mr Worley fairly cheerfully.

But the poor man did not respond. In the light from the oil lamp his face was haggard with worry.

'I hope you can do something quick. I'm real upset about her – she's just laid there doing nothin' and it's such a lovely litter. Fourteen she's had.'

I could understand his concern as I looked into the pen. Marigold was stretched motionless on her side while the tiny piglets swarmed around her udder; they were rushing from teat to teat, squealing and falling over each other in their desperate quest for nourishment. And the little bodies had the narrow, empty look which meant they had nothing in their stomachs. I hated to see a litter die off from sheer starvation but it could happen so easily. There came a time when they stopped trying to suck and began to lie about the pen. After that it was hopeless.

Crouching behind the sow with my thermometer in her rectum I looked along the swelling flank, the hair a rich copper red in the light from the lamp. 'Did she eat anything tonight?'

'Aye, cleaned up just as usual.'

The thermometer reading was normal. I began to run my hands along the udder, pulling in turn at the teats. The ravenous piglets caught at my fingers with their sharp

teeth as I pushed them to one side but my efforts failed to produce a drop of milk. The udder seemed full, even engorged, but I was unable to get even a bead down to the end of the teat.

‘There’s nowt there, is there?’ Mr Worley whispered anxiously.

I straightened up and turned to him ‘This is simply agalactia. There’s no mastitis and Marigold isn’t really ill, but there’s something interfering with the let-down mechanism of the milk. She’s got plenty of milk and there’s an injection which ought to bring it down.’

I tried to keep the triumphant look off my face as I spoke, because this was one of my favourite party tricks. There is a flavour of magic in the injection of pituitrin in these cases; it works within a minute and though no skill is required the effect is spectacular.

Marigold didn’t complain as I plunged in the needle and administered three cc deep into the muscle of her thigh. She was too busy conversing with her owner – they were almost nose to nose, exchanging soft pig noises.

After I had put away my syringe and listened for a few moments to the cooing sounds from the front end I thought it might be time. Mr Worley looked up in surprise as I reached down again to the udder.

‘What are you doing now?’

‘Having a feel to see if the milk’s come down yet.’

‘Why damn, it can’t be! You’ve only just given t’stuff and she’s bone dry!’

Oh, this was going to be good. A roll of drums would be appropriate at this moment. With finger and thumb I took hold of one of the teats at the turgid back end of the udder. I suppose it is a streak of exhibitionism in me which always makes me send the jet of milk spraying against the opposite wall in these circumstances; this time I thought it would be more impressive if I directed my shot past the innkeeper’s left ear, but I got my trajectory wrong and sprinkled his spectacles instead.

He took them off and wiped them slowly as if he couldn’t believe what he had seen. Then he bent over and tried for himself.

‘It’s a miracle!’ he cried as the milk spouted eagerly over his hand. ‘I’ve never seen owt like it!’

It didn’t take the little pigs long to catch on. Within a few seconds they had stopped

their fighting and squealing and settled down in a long, silent row. Their utterly rapt expressions all told the same story – they were going to make up for lost time.

Mr Worley was in reality based on pig-owner Mrs Bush who ran a country inn at Byland Abbey near Thirsk, exemplifying how Alf sometimes changed the gender of the odd book character. Mrs Bush kept some formidable saddleback pigs in her yard at the back of the inn and she was equally devoted to them and convinced that Alf loved them too. After If Only They Could Talk was published, Alf was at the inn one day having a drink, when he saw Mrs Bush making a beeline for him. Alf's daughter Rosie remembered him freezing as he never liked people recognizing themselves in his books, but Mrs Bush went on to say how much she liked the chapter about the man and the pigs and how she could understand just how he felt! Alf simply smiled politely and said he was pleased, no doubt relieved by her response.

When you work with an array of farm animals, even Christmas Day can be busy. James's hopes for a restful day are dashed when he's called early, first to see to a cow with milk fever and then to a choking goat. Dorothy the goat belongs to old Mr Kirby, a retired farmer who has a cottage and a mixture of animals on his land, including a cow, a few pigs and some goats, although he's always been particularly fond of the latter.

The cottage was in a village high up the Dale. Mr Kirby met me at the gate.

'Ee, lad,' he said. 'I'm right sorry to be bothering you this early in the morning and Christmas an' all, but I didn't have no choice. Dorothy's real bad.'

He led the way to a stone shed which had been converted into a row of pens. Behind the wire of one of them a large white Saanen goat peered out at us anxiously and as I watched her she gulped, gave a series of retching coughs, then stood trembling, saliva drooling from her mouth.

The farmer turned to me, wide-eyed. 'You see, I had to get you out, didn't I? If I left her till tomorrow she'd be a goner.'

'You're right, Mr Kirby,' I replied. 'You couldn't leave her. There's something in her throat.'

We went into the pen and as the old man held the goat against the wall I tried to open her mouth. She didn't like it very much and as I prised her jaws apart she startled me with a loud, long-drawn, human-sounding cry. It wasn't a big mouth but I have a small hand and, as the sharp back teeth tried to nibble me, I poked a finger deep into the pharynx.

There was something there all right. I could just touch it but I couldn't get hold of it.

Then the animal began to throw her head about and I had to come out; I stood there, saliva dripping from my hand, looking thoughtfully at Dorothy.

After a few moments I turned to the farmer. ‘You know, this is a bit baffling. I can feel something in the back of her throat, but it’s soft – like cloth. I’d been expecting to find a bit of twig, or something sharp sticking in there – it’s funny what a goat will pick up when she’s pottering around outside. But if it’s cloth, what the heck is holding it there? Why hasn’t she swallowed it down?’

James is mystified – what on earth has Dorothy swallowed? As the goat descends into a paroxysm of coughs, he heads to his car to retrieve a torch.

The old man held the torch as I once more pulled the goat’s mouth open and again heard the curious child-like wailing. It was when the animal was in full cry that I noticed something under the tongue – a thin, dark band.

‘I can see what’s holding the thing now,’ I cried. ‘It’s hooked round the tongue with string or something.’ Carefully I pushed my forefinger under the band and began to pull.

It wasn’t string. It began to stretch as I pulled carefully at it . . . like elastic. Then it stopped stretching and I felt a real resistance . . . whatever was in the throat was beginning to move. I kept up a gentle traction and very slowly the mysterious obstruction came sliding up over the back of the tongue and into the mouth, and when it came within reach I let go the elastic, grabbed the sodden mass and hauled it forth. It seemed as if there was no end to it – a long snake of dripping material nearly two feet long – but at last I had it out onto the straw of the pen.

Mr Kirby seized it and held it up and as he unravelled the mass wonderingly he gave a sudden cry.

‘God ’elp us, it’s me summer drawers!’

‘Your what?’

‘Me summer drawers. Ah don’t like them long johns when weather gets warmer and I allus change into these little short ’uns. Missus was havin’ a clear-out afore the end of t’year and she didn’t know whether to wash ’em or mek them into dusters. She washed them at t’finish and Dorothy must have got ’em off the line.’ He held up the tattered shorts and regarded them ruefully. ‘By gaw, they’ve seen better days, but I reckon Dorothy’s fettled them this time.’

The goat, after belching, is immediately better and Mr Kirby, unlike the farmer on James’s previous case who doesn’t greet James with so much as a Merry Christmas,

invites the vet into his cottage. There, in a tiny living room by a blazing fire, James is treated to Christmas cake and an enormous wedge of Wensleydale cheese – a traditional Yorkshire combination – washed down with a large glass of whisky. After listening to the carols on the wireless, the young vet returns to Skeldale House feeling decidedly more festive than when he arrived.

In Vet in Harness, after having been almost crushed by Mr Dacre's bull, as we've seen in Chapter 7, James returns to the practice and is relieved to read that his next call is: 'Mrs Tompkin, 14, Jasmine Terrace. Clip budgie's beak.' Veterinary practice can be enormously varied and a call-out to a budgie feels like a welcome break from the care of hefty farm animals. James arrives at the little terrace of old Mrs Tompkin and is greeted by her neighbour Mrs Dodd who keeps an eye out for the octogenarian.

She led me into the cramped little room. 'Here y'are, love,' she said to the old woman who sat in a corner. She put the pension book and money on the mantelpiece. 'And here's Mr Herriot come to see Peter for you.'

Mrs Tompkin nodded and smiled. 'Oh that's good. Poor little feller can't hardly eat with 'is long beak and I'm worried about him. He's me only companion, you know.'

'Yes, I understand, Mrs Tompkin.' I looked at the cage by the window with the green budgie perched inside. 'These little birds can be wonderful company when they start chattering.'

She laughed. 'Aye, but it's a funny thing. Peter never has said owt much. I think he's lazy! But I just like havin' him with me.'

'Of course you do,' I said. 'But he certainly needs attention now.'

The beak was greatly overgrown, curving away down till it touched the feathers of the breast. I would be able to revolutionize his life with one quick snip from my clippers.

The way I was feeling, this job was right up my street.

I opened the cage door and slowly inserted my hand.

'Come on, Peter,' I wheedled as the bird fluttered away from me. And I soon cornered him and enclosed him gently in my fingers. As I lifted him out I felt in my pocket with the other hand for the clippers, but as I poised them I stopped.

The tiny head was no longer poking cheekily from my fingers but had fallen loosely to one side. The eyes were closed. I stared at the bird uncomprehendingly for a moment then opened my hand. He lay quite motionless on my palm. He was dead.

Dry-mouthed, I continued to stare; at the beautiful iridescence of the plumage, the long beak which I didn't have to cut now, but mostly at the head dropping down over my forefinger. I hadn't squeezed him or been rough with him in any way but he was dead. It must have been sheer fright.

James and Mrs Dodd are aghast at the turn of events although Mrs Tompkin, who has poor hearing and sight, has not noticed the calamity. Agreeing that the shock of losing the bird would be terrible for the old lady, James rushes out to see if he can find a replacement. Hurriedly purchasing a green budgie, he races back to Jasmine Terrace and hangs the cage containing the new bird up at the window: 'I think you'll find all is well now.' Months later, James strikes up the courage to go back to Mrs Tompkin's and tentatively enquires after the bird.

His mistress reached up, tapped the metal and looked lovingly at him.

'You know, you wouldn't believe it,' she said. 'He's like a different bird.'

I swallowed. 'Is that so? In what way?'

'Well he's so active now. Lively as can be. You know 'e chatters to me all day long. It's wonderful what cuttin' a beak can do.'

Turkey and geese are also found on the odd farm or smallholding and in The Lord Made Them All dairy farmer Mr Bogg keeps a few turkeys and chickens alongside his main herd of Ayrshire cows. He is a regular client at the Darrowby practice, and James and Siegfried have grown accustomed to his penny-pinching ways, which, even by Yorkshire standards, are impressive.

Then there was Mr Bogg, whose tight-fistedness was a byword in a community where thrift was the norm. I had heard many tales of his parsimony but I have a few experiences of my own which I cherish.

He owned a herd of good Ayrshire cows and ran a few turkeys and chickens on the side. He certainly would not be short of money.

His turkeys were frequently afflicted with blackhead and he used to come to us for Stovarsol tablets which were the popular treatment at that time.

One afternoon he approached me in the surgery.

'Look,' he said. 'Ah keep comin' here for fifty or a hundred of them little tablets and it's a flippin' nuisance. I'd rather buy a whole tinful – it 'ud save a lot of journeys.'

'Yes, Mr Bogg, you're right,' I replied. 'It would be a much better idea. I'll get you

some now.’

When I returned from the dispensary I held up the tin. ‘This contains a thousand tablets and as it happens it’s the only one we have in stock. It has been opened and a few have been taken out but it is virtually a new tin.’

‘A few . . . taken out . . .?’ I could read the alarm in his eyes at the idea of paying for the full thousand when he was getting less than that.

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ I said. ‘There’s maybe something like a dozen tablets short – no more.’

My words failed to reassure him and as he left the surgery he looked gloomy and preoccupied.

He was back again that same evening. He rang the bell at about eight o’clock and I faced him on the front doorstep.

‘I’ve just come in to tell ye,’ he said. ‘I’ve been counting them tablets and there’s nine hundred and eighty-seven.’

On another occasion I went to buy some eggs from Mr Bogg. I got a dozen from him most weeks because his farm was on the outskirts of the town. When I returned home with this particular batch I found that there were only eleven eggs in the bag, so when I saw him a week later I mentioned the fact.

‘Mr Bogg,’ I said. ‘There were only eleven eggs in last week’s lot.’

‘Aye, ah knaw,’ he replied, fixing me with a steady eye. ‘But one of ’em was a double-yolked ’un.’