There was one marvellous thing about the set-up in Darrowby. I had the inestimable advantage of being a large animal practitioner with a passion for dogs and cats. So that although I spent most of my time in the wide outdoors of Yorkshire there was always the captivating background of the household pets to make a contrast.

I treated some of them every day and it made an extra interest in my life; interest of a different kind, based on sentiment instead of commerce and because of the way things were it was something I could linger over and enjoy. I suppose with a very intensive small animal practice it would be easy to regard the thing as a huge sausage machine, an endless procession of hairy forms to prod with hypodermic needles. But in Darrowby we got to know them all as individual entities.

Driving through the town I was able to identify my expatients without difficulty; Rover Johnson, recovered from his ear canker, coming out of the ironmonger's with his mistress, Patch Walker whose broken leg had healed beautifully, balanced happily on the back of his owner's coal wagon, or Spot Briggs who was a bit of a rake anyway and would soon be tearing himself again on barbed wire, ambling all alone across the market place cobbles in search of adventure.

I got quite a kick out of recalling their ailments and mulling over their characteristics. Because they all had their own personalities and they were manifested in different ways.

Like James, Alf saw plenty of family pets at the Thirsk practice and the James Herriot books are full of memorable stories about cats and dogs. As a teenager, Alf Wight ranged the hills and parks of Glasgow with his dog Don, a glossy and beautiful Irish setter with whom he developed a close bond. Thereon he set upon pursuing a veterinary career and, while he loved working with all animals over the subsequent decades, whenever he was asked what his favourite animal was, he invariably answered, 'most definitely dogs'.

His veterinary training, however, focused mainly on horses and large farm animals, dogs were still deemed more of a sideline concern for vets, and cats were hardly covered at all. Despite this, Alf was able to set up a small animal surgery at the Thirsk practice – Donald was happy to focus on their equine patients and Alf, with the help of Brian and various assistants, could attend to dogs and cats in between farm visits. The surgery wasn't the gleaming operating room he'd envisaged during student days, but simply the consulting room of 23 Kirkgate or a dark corner of a cow byre or farmyard

kitchen, but Alf nonetheless found the treatment of dogs and cats rewarding work.

The fascination and love that Alf had for dogs – the huge range of breeds, their various personalities, quirks, ailments and devotion to humans – shines through in the James Herriot books. Cedric the boxer, who features in Vets Might Fly, is just one of the many memorable dogs we are introduced to after James receives a telephone call from Cedric's owner, Mrs Rumney.

'Mr Herriot . . . I should be grateful if you would come and see my dog.' It was a woman, obviously upper class.

'Certainly. What's the trouble?'

'Well . . . he . . . er . . . he seems to suffer from . . . a certain amount of flatus.'

'I beg your pardon?'

There was a long pause. 'He has . . . excessive flatus.'

'In what way, exactly?'

'Well . . . I suppose you'd describe it as . . . windiness.' The voice had begun to tremble.

I thought I could see a gleam of light. 'You mean his stomach . . .?'

'No, not his stomach. He passes . . . er . . . a considerable quantity of . . . wind from his . . . his . . .' A note of desperation had crept in.

'Ah, yes!' All became suddenly clear. 'I quite understand. But that doesn't sound very serious. Is he ill?'

'No, he's very fit in other ways.'

'Well then, do you think it's necessary for me to see him?'

'Oh yes, indeed, Mr Herriot. I wish you would come as soon as possible. It has become quite . . . quite a problem.'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll look in this morning. Can I have your name and address, please?'

'It's Mrs Rumney, The Laurels.'

The Laurels was a very nice house on the edge of the town standing back from the

road in a large garden. Mrs Rumney herself let me in and I felt a shock of surprise at my first sight of her. It wasn't just that she was strikingly beautiful; there was an unworldly air about her. She would be around forty but had the appearance of a heroine in a Victorian novel – tall, willowy, ethereal. And I could understand immediately her hesitation on the phone. Everything about her suggested fastidiousness and delicacy.

'Cedric is in the kitchen,' she said. 'I'll take you through.'

I had another surprise when I saw Cedric. An enormous boxer hurled himself on me in delight, clawing at my chest with the biggest, horniest feet I had seen for a long time. I tried to fight him off but he kept at me, panting ecstatically into my face and wagging his entire rear end.

'Sit down, boy!' the lady said sharply, then, as Cedric took absolutely no notice, she turned to me nervously. 'He's so friendly.'

'Yes,' I said breathlessly, 'I can see that.' I finally managed to push the huge animal away and backed into a corner for safety. 'How often does this . . . excessive flatus occur?'

As if in reply an almost palpable sulphurous wave arose from the dog and eddied around me. It appeared that the excitement of seeing me had activated Cedric's weakness. I was up against the wall and unable to obey my first instinct to run for cover so I held my hand over my face for a few moments before speaking.

'Is that what you meant?'

Mrs Rumney waved a lace handkerchief under her nose and the faintest flush crept into the pallor of her cheeks. 'Yes,' she replied almost inaudibly. 'Yes . . . that is it.'

'Oh well,' I said briskly. 'There's nothing to worry about. Let's go into the other room and we'll have a word about his diet and a few other things.'

It turned out that Cedric was getting rather a lot of meat and I drew up a little chart cutting down the protein and adding extra carbohydrates. I prescribed a kaolin antacid mixture to be given night and morning and left the house in a confident frame of mind.

Cedric's flatulence, however, does not improve. James goes on to try various powders, remedies and vast quantities of charcoal biscuits, as recommended by Siegfried, all of which make not the slightest difference to his condition. At the end of a long day, James decides to pay Mrs Rumney a visit, just as she is holding an elegant drinks party where James is mortified to see Cedric bound enthusiastically into the room and leap upon the guests, almost tearing off one lady's dress. To make matters worse, the room

then fills with ‘an unmistakable effluvium’ of which Cedric is clearly the guilty party.

James finally comes to the conclusion that Cedric is simply not the dog for Mrs Rumney. Con Fenton, however, a retired farm worker who helps out in the garden of Laurel House, has taken a liking to the dog, so James suggests he take Cedric and that Mrs Rumney find herself a more suitable pet. She agrees and acquires a poodle, while Con Fenton takes in Cedric and they become devoted to each other. When James visits the pair, however, he notices a familiar pungency rising from Cedric, although Con is entirely oblivious to it. It soon becomes clear why, as the two men chat and James takes in the fragrance of some carnation flowers in a vase.

Con watched me approvingly. ‘Aye, they’re lovely flowers, aren’t they? T’missus at Laurels lets me bring ’ome what I want and I reckon them carnations is me favourite.’

‘Yes, they’re a credit to you.’ I still kept my nose among the blooms.

‘There’s only one thing,’ the old man said pensively. ‘Ah don’t get t’full benefit of ’em.’

‘How’s that, Con?’

He pulled at his pipe a couple of times. ‘Well, you can hear ah speak a bit funny, like?’

‘No . . . no . . . not really.’

‘Oh aye, ye know ah do. I’ve been like it since I were a lad. I ’ad a operation for adenoids and summat went wrong.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,’ I said.

‘Well, it’s nowt serious, but it’s left me lackin’ in one way.’

‘You mean . . .?’ A light was beginning to dawn in my mind, an elucidation of how man and dog had found each other, of why their relationship was so perfect, of the certainty of their happy future together. It seemed like fate.

‘Aye,’ the old man went on sadly. ‘I ’ave no sense of smell.’

Just as the people of the Dales have different personalities, so too do their dogs. Judy the sheepdog, who features in Vet in a Spin, has a particularly caring nature and instinctively looks after other animals around her. While treating a bullock on the farm of Eric Abbot, James notices the big dog sitting nearby.

I inserted the needle into the jugular and tipped up the bottle of clear fluid. Two drachms of the iodide I used to use, in eight ounces of distilled water and it didn’t take

long to flow in. In fact the bottle was nearly empty before I noticed Judy.

I had been aware of a big dog sitting near me all the time, but as I neared the end of the injection a black nose moved ever closer till it was almost touching the needle. Then the nose moved along the rubber tube up to the bottle and back again, sniffing with the utmost concentration. When I removed the needle the nose began a careful inspection of the injection site. Then a tongue appeared and began to lick the bullock's neck methodically.

I squatted back on my heels and watched. This was something more than mere curiosity; everything in the dog's attitude suggested intense interest and concern.

'You know, Eric,' I said. 'I have the impression that this dog isn't just watching me. She's supervising the whole job.'

The farmer laughed. 'You're right there. She's a funny old bitch is Judy – sort of a nurse. If there's anything amiss she's on duty. You can't keep her away.'

Judy looked up quickly at the sound of her name. She was a handsome animal; not the usual colour, but a variegated brindle with waving lines of brown and grey mingling with the normal black and white of the farm collie. Maybe there was a cross somewhere but the result was very attractive and the effect was heightened by her bright-eyed, laughing-mouthed friendliness.

I reached out and tickled the backs of her ears and she wagged mightily – not just her tail but her entire rear end. 'I suppose she's just good-natured.'

'Oh aye, she is,' the farmer said. 'But it's not only that. It sounds daft but I think Judy feels a sense of responsibility to all the stock on t'farm.'

Judy sniffs the rug covering the bullock, then gives its shaggy forehead a lick and stations herself facing the patient. The farmer Eric assures James that 'nothing'll shift her till he's dead or better'. Five days later, James discovers Judy is still with the bullock, which is much better. The farmer tells James how she gives every new-born calf a good lick over as soon as it comes into the world, as she does with any kittens, and always sleeps with the farm animals every night. A week later James returns to see the bullock which is galloping around his box like a racehorse. Enquiring after Judy, Eric points her out.

I looked through the doorway. Judy was stalking importantly across the yard. She had something in her mouth – a yellow, fluffy object.

I craned out further. 'What is she carrying?'

‘It’s a chicken.’

‘A chicken?’

‘Aye, there’s a brood of them runnin’ around just now. They’re only a month old and t’awd bitch seems to think they’d be better off in the stable. She’s made a bed for them in there and she keeps tryin’ to curl herself round them. But the little things won’t ’ave it.’

I watched Judy disappear into the stable. Very soon she came out, trotted after a group of tiny chicks which were pecking happily among the cobbles and gently scooped one up. Busily she made her way back to the stable but as she entered the previous chick reappeared in the doorway and pottered over to rejoin his friends.

She was having a frustrating time but I knew she would keep at it because that was the way she was. Judy the nurse dog was still on duty.

In Thirsk, Alf Wight continued to keep his own dogs, all of them becoming cherished companions. They invariably accompanied him on rounds and, as a break between visits, Alf liked nothing more than getting out of the car and escaping for walks with his dog, where he often revelled in the beauty and solitude of the Dales. In the books, James describes walking with his dog Sam, a composite beagle dog based on his real dogs Danny and Dinah. Danny originally belonged to Alf’s wife Joan and after their marriage he went on to accompany Alf everywhere. He had a look of a West Highland white terrier but was probably a mix of breeds and went on to live to a ripe old age of fourteen, when he was sadly killed on the main road outside their house. Dinah was the successor to Danny, one of a pack of beagle hunting dogs bred by Donald Sinclair which he gave to Alf and his family in 1953 as a successor to Danny.

This was the real Yorkshire with the clean limestone wall riding the hill’s edge and the path cutting brilliant green through the crowding heather. And, walking face-on to the scented breeze I felt the old tingle of wonder at being alone on the wide moorland where nothing stirred and the spreading miles of purple blossom and green turf reached away till it met the hazy blue of the sky.

But I wasn’t really alone. There was Sam, and he made all the difference. Helen had brought a lot of things into my life and Sam was one of the most precious; he was a beagle and her own personal pet. He would be about two years old when I first saw him and I had no way of knowing that he was to be my faithful companion, my car dog, my friend who sat by my side through the lonely hours of driving till his life ended at the age of fourteen. He was the first of a series of cherished dogs whose comradeship have warmed and lightened my working life.

Sam adopted me on sight. It was as though he had read the Faithful Hound Manual

because he was always near me; paws on the dash as he gazed eagerly through the windscreen on my rounds, head resting on my foot in our bed-sitting room, trotting just behind me wherever I moved. If I had a beer in a pub he would be under my chair and even when I was having a haircut you only had to lift the white sheet to see Sam crouching beneath my legs. The only place I didn't dare take him was the cinema and on these occasions he crawled under the bed and sulked.

Most dogs love car-riding but to Sam it was a passion which never waned – even in the night hours; he would gladly leave his basket when the world was asleep, stretch a couple of times and follow me out into the cold. He would be on to the seat before I got the car door fully open and this action became so much a part of my life that for a long time after his death I still held the door open unthinkingly, waiting for him. And I still remember the pain I felt when he did not bound inside.

And having him with me added so much to the intermissions I granted myself on my daily rounds. Whereas in offices and factories they had tea breaks I just stopped the car and stepped out into the splendour which was always at hand and walked for a spell down hidden lanes, through woods, or as today, along one of the grassy tracks which ran over the high tops.

This thing which I had always done had a new meaning now. Anybody who has ever walked a dog knows the abiding satisfaction which comes from giving pleasure to a loved animal, and the sight of the little form trotting ahead of me lent a depth which had been missing before.

By the time of Every Living Thing, James has a new dog Dinah, based on Alf's real dog Dinah, who also grew fat. The beagle loved her food and few could resist her liquid brown eyes when she was after a morsel of something tasty. The family never could and the dog grew very large, despite going out with Alf for regular walks. Practice assistant Calum, who has a way with all animals, is not shy in pointing out Dinah's portliness.

Everything was going with a bang when Dinah, our second beagle and successor to Sam, ran in from the garden.

'This is Dinah,' I said.

'Oh-ho, oh-ho, little fat Dinah,' said Calum in a rumbling bass. It was not a complimentary remark, because my little dog was undoubtedly too fat, and an embarrassment to a vet who was constantly adjuring people to keep their dogs slim, but Dinah didn't seem to mind. She wagged her whole back end until I thought she would tie herself in a knot. Her response was remarkable and she clearly found this new voice immensely attractive. Calum bent down and she rolled on her back in ecstasy as he rubbed her tummy.

Helen laughed. ‘Gosh, she really likes you!’

The real Dinah died in 1963 at the age of eleven, having unwittingly consumed some rat-poison, much to the distress of the family. As a dog-lover, James can empathize with the sadness or heartbreak owners experience when their dogs die or suffer an injury. As Alf Wight put it: ‘I am as soppy over my dogs as any old lady and it is a trait which has always stood me in good stead in my dealing with clients.’ That sensitivity also resulted in some very poignant stories about dogs in his books, including that of Bob the Labrador who features in If Only They Could Talk.

‘I’ve come to see your dog,’ I said, and the old man smiled.

‘Oh, I’m glad you’ve come, sir,’ he said. ‘I’m getting a bit worried about the old chap. Come inside, please.’

He led me into the tiny living room. ‘I’m alone now, sir. Lost my missus over a year ago. She used to think the world of the old dog.’

The grim evidence of poverty was everywhere. In the worn-out lino, the fireless hearth, the dank, musty smell of the place. The wallpaper hung away from the damp patches and on the table the old man’s solitary dinner was laid; a fragment of bacon, a few fried potatoes and a cup of tea. This was life on the old-age pension.

In the corner, on a blanket, lay my patient, a cross-bred Labrador. He must have been a big, powerful dog in his time, but the signs of age showed in the white hairs round his muzzle and the pale opacity in the depth of his eyes. He lay quietly and looked at me without hostility.

‘Getting on a bit, isn’t he, Mr Dean?’

‘Aye he is that. Nearly fourteen, but he’s been like a pup galloping about until these last few weeks. Wonderful dog for his age is old Bob and he’s never offered to bite anybody in his life. Children can do anything with him. He’s my only friend now – I hope you’ll soon be able to put him right.’

‘Is he off his food, Mr Dean?’

‘Yes, clean off, and that’s a strange thing because, by gum, he could eat. He always sat by me and put his head on my knee at meal times, but he hasn’t been doing it lately.’

I looked at the dog with growing uneasiness. The abdomen was grossly distended and I could read the tell-tale symptoms of pain; the catch in the respirations, the retracted commissures of the lips, the anxious, preoccupied expression in the eyes.

When his master spoke, the tail thumped twice on the blankets and a momentary interest showed in the white old eyes; but it quickly disappeared and the blank, inward look returned.

I passed my hand carefully over the dog's abdomen. Ascites was pronounced and the dropsical fluid had gathered till the pressure was intense. 'Come on, old chap,' I said, 'let's see if we can roll you over.' The dog made no resistance as I eased him slowly onto his other side, but, just as the movement was completed, he whimpered and looked round. The cause of the trouble was now only too easy to find.

I palpated gently. Through the thin muscle of the flank I could feel a hard, corrugated mass; certainly a splenic or hepatic carcinoma, enormous and completely inoperable. I stroked the old dog's head as I tried to collect my thoughts. This wasn't going to be easy.

'Is he going to be ill for long?' the old man asked, and again came the thump, thump of the tail at the sound of the loved voice. 'It's miserable when Bob isn't following me round the house when I'm doing my little jobs.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Dean, but I'm afraid this is something very serious. You see this large swelling. It is caused by an internal growth.'

'You mean . . . cancer?' the little man said faintly.

'I'm afraid so, and it has progressed too far for anything to be done. I wish there was something I could do to help him, but there isn't.'

The old man looked bewildered and his lips trembled. 'Then he's going to die?'

I swallowed hard. 'We really can't just leave him to die, can we? He's in some distress now, but it will soon be an awful lot worse. Don't you think it would be kindest to put him to sleep? After all, he's had a good, long innings.' I always aimed at a brisk, matter-of-fact approach, but the old clichés had an empty ring.

The old man was silent, then he said, 'Just a minute,' and slowly and painfully knelt down by the side of the dog. He did not speak, but ran his hand again and again over the grey old muzzle and the ears, while the tail thump, thump, thumped on the floor.

He knelt there a long time while I stood in the cheerless room, my eyes taking in the faded pictures on the walls, the frayed, grimy curtains, the broken-springed armchair.

At length the old man struggled to his feet and gulped once or twice. Without looking at me, he said huskily, 'All right, will you do it now?'

I filled the syringe and said the things I always said. ‘You needn’t worry, this is absolutely painless. Just an overdose of an anaesthetic. It is really an easy way out for the old fellow.’

The dog did not move as the needle was inserted, and, as the barbiturate began to flow into the vein, the anxious expression left his face and the muscles began to relax. By the time the injection was finished, the breathing had stopped.

‘Is that it?’ the old man whispered.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ I said. ‘He is out of his pain now.’

The old man stood motionless except for the clasping and unclasping of his hands. When he turned to face me his eyes were bright. ‘That’s right, we couldn’t let him suffer, and I’m grateful for what you’ve done. And now, what do I owe you for your services, sir?’

‘Oh, that’s all right, Mr Dean,’ I said quickly. ‘It’s nothing – nothing at all. I was passing right by here – it was no trouble.’

The old man was astonished. ‘But you can’t do that for nothing.’

‘Now please say no more about it, Mr Dean. As I told you, I was passing right by your door.’ I said goodbye and went out of the house, through the passage and into the street. In the bustle of people and the bright sunshine, I could still see only the stark, little room, the old man and his dead dog.

As I walked towards my car, I heard a shout behind me. The old man was shuffling excitedly towards me in his slippers. His cheeks were streaked and wet, but he was smiling. In his hand he held a small, brown object.

‘You’ve been very kind, sir. I’ve got something for you.’ He held out the object and I looked at it. It was tattered but just recognizable as a precious relic of a bygone celebration.

‘Go on, it’s for you,’ said the old man. ‘Have a cigar.’

Providing services for free or at a much-reduced rate to clients living in poverty was an all-too-common occurrence at the Darrowby practice. While vets’ bills are a stretch for some animal owners, there is one client who can easily meet the cost of calling out a vet – as she does regularly. Mrs Pumphrey, whom we meet in If Only They Could Talk, calls in James to attend to her Pekinese dog Tricki Woo and his reoccurring ‘flop-bott’.

Mrs Pumphrey was an elderly widow. Her late husband, a beer baron whose breweries and pubs were scattered widely over the broad bosom of Yorkshire, had left her a vast fortune and a beautiful house on the outskirts of Darrowby. Here she lived with a large staff of servants, a gardener, a chauffeur and Tricki Woo. Tricki Woo was a Pekinese and the apple of his mistress's eye.

Standing now in the magnificent doorway, I furtively rubbed the toes of my shoes on the backs of my trousers and blew on my cold hands. I could almost see the deep armchair drawn close to the leaping flames, the tray of cocktail biscuits, the bottle of excellent sherry. Because of the sherry, I was always careful to time my visits for half an hour before lunch.

A maid answered my ring, beaming on me as an honoured guest, and led me to the room, crammed with expensive furniture and littered with glossy magazines and the latest novels. Mrs Pumphrey, in the high-backed chair by the fire, put down her book with a cry of delight. 'Tricki! Tricki! Here is your Uncle Herriot.' I had been made an uncle very early and, sensing the advantages of the relationship, had made no objection.

Tricki, as always, bounded from his cushion, leaped onto the back of a sofa and put his paws on my shoulders. He then licked my face thoroughly before retiring, exhausted. He was soon exhausted because he was given roughly twice the amount of food needed for a dog of his size. And it was the wrong kind of food.

'Oh, Mr Herriot,' Mrs Pumphrey said, looking at her pet anxiously. 'I'm so glad you've come. Tricki has gone flop-bott again.'

This ailment, not to be found in any textbook, was her way of describing the symptoms of Tricki's impacted anal glands. When the glands filled up, he showed discomfort by sitting down suddenly in mid-walk and his mistress would rush to the phone in great agitation.

'Mr Herriot! Please come, he's going flop-bott again!'

I hoisted the little dog on to a table and, by pressure on the anus with a pad of cotton wool, I evacuated the glands.

It baffled me that the Peke was always so pleased to see me.

Any dog who could still like a man who grabbed him and squeezed his bottom hard every time they met had to have an incredibly forgiving nature. But Tricki never showed any resentment; in fact he was an outstandingly equable little animal, bursting with intelligence, and I was genuinely attached to him. It was a pleasure to be his

personal physician.

The squeezing over, I lifted my patient from the table, noticing the increased weight, the padding of extra flesh over the ribs. ‘You know, Mrs Pumphrey, you’re overfeeding him again. Didn’t I tell you to cut out all those pieces of cake and give him more protein?’

‘Oh yes, Mr Herriot,’ Mrs Pumphrey wailed. ‘But what can I do? He’s so tired of chicken.’

I shrugged; it was hopeless. I allowed the maid to lead me to the palatial bathroom where I always performed a ritual handwashing after the operation. It was a huge room with a fully stocked dressing-table, massive green ware and rows of glass shelves laden with toilet preparations. My private guest towel was laid out next to the slab of expensive soap.

Then I returned to the drawing room, my sherry glass was filled and I settled down by the fire to listen to Mrs Pumphrey. It couldn’t be called a conversation because she did all the talking, but I always found it rewarding.

Mrs Pumphrey launches into a variety of charming but entirely fanciful stories about the wonders of Tricki Woo, who apparently studies the horse racing columns so he can tell his owner which horse to place a bet on. Mrs Pumphrey also tells James how frightened she was when Tricki Woo went ‘completely crackerdog’ the previous week, suddenly running about in circles, barking and yelping and then falling over on his side ‘like a little dead thing’ before getting up and walking away as if nothing has happened.

Hysteria, I thought, brought on by wrong feeding and overexcitement. I put down my glass and fixed Mrs Pumphrey with a severe glare. ‘Now look, this is just what I was talking about. If you persist in feeding all that fancy rubbish to Tricki you are going to ruin his health. You really must get him on to a sensible dog diet of one or, at the most, two small meals a day of meat and brown bread or a little biscuit. And nothing in between.’

Mrs Pumphrey shrank into her chair, a picture of abject guilt. ‘Oh, please don’t speak to me like that. I do try to give him the right things, but it is so difficult. When he begs for his little titbits, I can’t refuse him.’ She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

But I was unrelenting. ‘All right, Mrs Pumphrey, it’s up to you, but I warn you that if you go on as you are doing, Tricki will go crackerdog more and more often.’

I left the cosy haven with reluctance, pausing on the gravelled drive to look back at Mrs Pumphrey waving and Tricki, as always, standing against the window, his

wide-mouthed face apparently in the middle of a hearty laugh.

Driving home, I mused on the many advantages of being Tricki's uncle. When he went to the seaside he sent me boxes of oak-smoked kippers; and when the tomatoes ripened in his greenhouse, he sent a pound or two every week. Tins of tobacco arrived regularly, sometimes with a photograph carrying a loving inscription.

But it was when the Christmas hamper arrived from Fortnum and Mason's that I decided that I was on a really good thing which should be helped along a bit. Hitherto, I had merely rung up and thanked Mrs Pumphrey for the gifts, and she had been rather cool, pointing out that it was Tricki who had sent the things and he was the one who should be thanked.

With the arrival of the hamper it came to me, blindingly, that I had been guilty of a grave error of tactics. I set myself to compose a letter to Tricki. Avoiding Siegfried's sardonic eye, I thanked my doggy nephew for his Christmas gifts and for all his generosity in the past. I expressed my sincere hopes that the festive fare had not upset his delicate digestion and suggested that if he did experience any discomfort he should have recourse to the black powder his uncle always prescribed. A vague feeling of professional shame was easily swamped by floating visions of kippers, tomatoes and hampers. I addressed the envelope to Master Tricki Pumphrey, Barlby Grange and slipped it into the post box with only a slight feeling of guilt.

On my next visit, Mrs Pumphrey drew me to one side. 'Mr Herriot,' she whispered, 'Tricki adored your charming letter and he will keep it always, but he was very put out about one thing – you addressed it to Master Tricki and he does insist upon Mister. He was dreadfully affronted at first, quite beside himself, but when he saw it was from you he soon recovered his good temper. I can't think why he should have these little prejudices. Perhaps it is because he is an only dog – I do think an only dog develops more prejudices than one from a large family.'

Alf Wight and his family were similarly fond of Bambi – another little Pekinese dog and the real 'Tricki Woo'. Bambi was the much-loved and very indulged pet of Miss Marjorie Warner who lived in a large house in Sowerby. Alf saw a lot of Bambi and developed a genuine liking for the little dog and his owner. As children Rosie and Jim remember the exciting gifts addressed to 'Uncle Wight' that would arrive on the doorstep of 23 Kirkgate whenever Bambi went on holiday, from Whitby kippers (a favourite of Alf's) to hampers filled with caviar, hams and an array of exotic foods. Alf also got himself into trouble when he addressed a thank you letter to Miss Warner and not to Bambi himself, and the correct terminology – 'Bambi Warner Esq' and not 'Master Bambi Warner' – was a must. Miss Warner didn't throw parties like her fictional personification, that was another well-to-do client of the Thirsk practice who invited Alf to one of her balls. Miss Warner nonetheless recognized herself in the books and was happy to be featured in what was an affectionate and memorable

portrayal.

Another client who devotes her life to the care of dogs, which, unlike Tricki Woo, are without home or owners, is Sister Rose. She runs a shelter for abandoned dogs and in The Lord God Made Them All asks James to pay her a visit to take a look at one of her dogs, Amber.

I looked at the pale, almost honey-coloured shading of the hair on the dog's ears and flanks. 'I can see why you've given her that name. I bet she'd really glow in the sunshine.'

The nurse laughed. 'Yes, funnily enough it was sunny when I first saw her and the name just jumped into my mind.' She gave me a sideways glance. 'I'm good at names, as you know.'

'Oh yes, without a doubt,' I said, smiling. It was a little joke between us. Sister Rose had to be good at christening the endless stream of unwanted animals which passed through the little dog sanctuary which lay behind her house and which she ran and maintained by organizing small shows, jumble sales, etc., and by spending her own money.

And she didn't only give her money, she also gave her precious time, because as a nursing sister she led a full life of service to the human race. I often asked myself how she found the time to fight for the animals, too. It was a mystery to me, but I admired her.

'Where did this one come from?' I asked.

Sister Rose shrugged. 'Oh, found wandering in the streets of Hebbleton. Nobody knows her and there have been no enquiries to the police. Obviously abandoned.'

James examines Amber, who has some bare patches around her toes, eyes and cheek. He prescribes some ointment for Sister Rose to rub in morning and night. Two weeks later, however, she phones to say the patches are spreading, and James takes another look at Amber who's now in a worse state. James is sorry to diagnose a very serious case of demodectic mange, which is often incurable but he tells Sister Rose to try rubbing a lotion in every day just in case that works. A week later, though, Amber's condition has worsened, she has lost even more hair but is still wagging her tail. Further treatment also fails and the situation starts to look increasingly desperate until James decides to take Amber back to the surgery with him.

Veterinary surgeons would never last in their profession if they became too involved with their patients. I knew from experience that most of my colleagues were just as sentimental over animals as the owners, but before I knew what was happening I

became involved with Amber.

I fed her myself, changed her bedding and carried out the treatment. I saw her as often as possible during the day, but when I think of her now it is always night. It was late November when darkness came in soon after four o'clock and the last few visits were a dim-sighted fumbling in cow byres, and when I came home I always drove round to the yard at the back of Skeldale House and trained my headlights on the stable.

When I threw open the door Amber was always there, waiting to welcome me, her forefeet resting on the plywood sheet, her long yellow ears gleaming in the bright beam. That is my picture of her to this day. Her temperament never altered and her tail swished the straw unceasingly as I did all the uncomfortable things to her; rubbing the tender skin with the lotion, injecting her with the staph toxoid, taking further skin scrapings to check progress.

As the days and the weeks went by and I saw no improvement I became a little desperate. I gave her sulphur baths, and derris baths, although I had done no good with such things in the past, and I also began to go through all the proprietary things on the market. In veterinary practice every resistant disease spawns a multitude of quack 'cures' and I lost count of the shampoos and washes I swilled over the young animal in the hope that there might be some magic element in them despite my misgivings.

These nightly sessions under the headlights became part of my life and I think I might have gone on blindly for an indefinite period until one very dark evening with the rain beating on the cobbles of the yard I seemed to see the young dog for the first time.

The condition had spread over the entire body, leaving only tufts and straggling wisps of hair. The long ears were golden no longer. They were almost bald, as was the rest of her face and head. Everywhere her skin was thickened and wrinkled and had assumed a bluish tinge. And when I squeezed it a slow ooze of pus and serum came up around my fingers.

I flopped back and sat down in the straw while Amber leaped around me, licking and wagging. Despite her terrible state, her nature was unchanged.

James eventually realizes that he can do no more for Amber, who is clearly now uncomfortable and soon to be in a lot of pain. He drives into the practice yard and opens the garage door.

And it was like all the other times. Amber was there in the beam, paws on the plywood, body swinging with her wagging, mouth open and panting with delight, welcoming me.

I put the barbiturate and syringe into my pocket before climbing into the pen. For a long time I made a fuss of her, patting her and talking to her as she leaped up at me. Then I filled the syringe.

'Sit, girl,' I said, and she flopped obediently onto her hindquarters. I gripped her right leg above the elbow to raise the radial vein. There was no need for clipping – all the hair had gone. Amber looked at me interestedly, wondering what new game this might be as I slipped the needle into the vein. I realized that there was no need to say the things I always said. 'She won't know a thing.' 'This is just an overdose of anaesthetic.' 'It's an easy way out for her.' There was no sorrowing owner to hear me. There were just the two of us.

And as I murmured, 'Good girl, Amber, good lass,' as she sank down on the straw, I had the conviction that if I had said those things they would have been true. She didn't know a thing between her playfulness and oblivion and it was indeed an easy way out from that prison which would soon become a torture chamber.

I stepped from the pen and switched off the car lights and in the cold darkness the yard had never seemed so empty. After the weeks of struggle the sense of loss and of failure was overpowering, but at the end I was at least able to spare Amber the ultimate miseries: the internal abscesses and septicaemia which await a dog suffering from a progressive and incurable demodectic mange.

For a long time I carried a weight around with me, and I feel some of it now after all these years. Because the tragedy of Amber was that she was born too soon. At the present time we can cure most cases of demodectic mange by a long course of organo-phosphates and antibiotics, but neither of these things were available then when I needed them.

It is still a dread condition, but we have fought patiently with our modern weapons and won most of the battles over the past few years. I know several fine dogs in Darrowby who have survived, and when I see them in the streets, healthy and glossy-coated, the picture of Amber comes back into my mind. It is always dark and she is always in the headlights' beam.

Sister Rose was based on another Sister, Ann Lilley, who ran several small animal sanctuaries in North Yorkshire and who dedicated her life to caring for homeless animals. She also helped to set up the Jerry Green Centre for cats and dogs at Catton near Thirsk. There, Alf had become very attached to a golden retriever cared for by Sister Ann Lilley but which sadly died.

James sees other dogs who come from happy homes but who repeatedly get themselves into trouble, usually by eating something they shouldn't. Brandy is a golden Labrador who likes nothing more than to root through dustbins only to emerge

with a tin can wedged on his face.

In the semi-darkness of the surgery passage I thought it was a hideous growth dangling from the side of the dog's face but as he came closer I saw that it was only a condensed milk can. Not that condensed milk cans are commonly found sprouting from dogs' cheeks, but I was relieved because I knew I was dealing with Brandy again.

I hoisted him onto the table. 'Brandy, you've been at the dustbin again.'

The big golden Labrador gave me an apologetic grin and did his best to lick my face. He couldn't manage it since his tongue was jammed inside the can, but he made up for it by a furious wagging of tail and rear end.

'Oh, Mr Herriot, I am sorry to trouble you again.' Mrs Westby, his attractive young mistress, smiled ruefully. 'He just won't keep out of that dustbin. Sometimes the children and I can get the cans off ourselves but this one is stuck fast. His tongue is trapped under the lid.'

'Yes . . . yes . . .' I eased my finger along the jagged edge of the metal. 'It's a bit tricky, isn't it? We don't want to cut his mouth.'

As I reached for a pair of forceps I thought of the many other occasions when I had done something like this for Brandy. He was one of my patients, a huge, lolloping, slightly goofy animal, but this dustbin raiding was becoming an obsession.

He liked to fish out a can and lick out the tasty remnants, but his licking was carried out with such sudden dedication that he burrowed deeper and deeper until he got stuck. Again and again he had been freed by his family or myself from fruit salad cans, corned beef cans, baked bean cans, soup cans. There didn't seem to be any kind of can he didn't like.

I gripped the edge of the lid with my forceps and gently bent it back along its length till I was able to lift it away from the tongue. An instant later, that tongue was slobbering all over my cheek as Brandy expressed his delight and thanks.

'Get back, you daft dog!' I said, laughing, as I held the panting face away from me.

'Yes, come down, Brandy.' Mrs Westby hauled him from the table and spoke sharply. 'It's all very fine making a fuss now, but you're becoming a nuisance with this business. It will have to stop.'

The scolding had no effect on the lashing tail and I saw that his mistress was smiling. You just couldn't help liking Brandy, because he was a great ball of affection and tolerance without an ounce of malice in him.

Along with his fondness for dustbins, Brandy has other peculiar traits. While walking his dog in Darrowby, James often sees him playing in the fields and one day witnesses something extraordinary.

There is a little children's playground in one corner – a few swings, a roundabout and a slide. Brandy was disporting himself on the slide.

For this activity he had assumed an uncharacteristic gravity of expression and stood calmly in the queue of children. When his turn came he mounted the steps, slid down the metal slope, all dignity and importance, then took a staid walk round to rejoin the queue.

The little boys and girls who were his companions seemed to take him for granted, but I found it difficult to tear myself away. I could have watched him all day.

The character of Brandy is a composite of a few dogs Alf knew, including a golden retriever called Moses who also loved to go down the slides in playgrounds. The dog belonged to locals John and Sue Garside, who are still close friends with the Wight family and John worked with Alf's daughter Rosie as a GP in Thirsk. Jim also remembers one particular dog coming into the practice with a tin can firmly stuck on his face, although he seemed entirely unfazed by it as he was still rooting about, sniffing and cocking his leg as if nothing had happened. There was another troublesome dog who, living in a pub, constantly ate bar cloths, so much so that Jim and his dad had to operate on him four times to remove the offending articles. Some dogs never learn!

In Let Sleeping Vets Lie old Mrs Barker brings her twelve-year-old spaniel into the practice. The dog has a bad infection in her womb and requires an operation. Although James is gradually doing more small animal surgery, the dog is in a bad way, panting and trembling with the signs of a weak heart, and he decides to send her to Granville Bennett, a small animal specialist based in Hartington.

By the end of the 1950s Alf was similarly performing the odd hysterectomy on cats and bitches but he had to send more complex cases to a small animal surgeon, Denton Pette, in Darlington, on whom Granville Bennett is based. Like Granville Bennett, Pette was an immensely skilled surgeon, operating on his small animal patients with great speed and finesse, despite his large, solid bulk. He and his wife Eve were also generous with their hospitality and Alf often ended evenings with them slightly worse for wear, unable to keep up with Pette who had a seemingly indestructible constitution. Alf's son Jim also worked at Pette's practice as a student in 1964 and 1965 and, even as a young man, he could never match the older vet's ability to drink. Despite his fondness for alcohol, Pette was always immaculately dressed and charming with clients, and his focus on family pets rather than farm animals would become

increasingly common across veterinary practice from the 1960s onwards.

There was no doubt Granville Bennett had become something of a legend in northern England. In those days when specialization was almost unknown he had gone all out for small animal work – never looked at farm stock – and had set a new standard by the modern procedures in his animal hospital which was run as nearly as possible on human lines. It was, in fact, fashionable for veterinary surgeons of that era to belittle dog and cat work; a lot of the older men who had spent their lives among the teeming thousands of draught horses in city and agriculture would sneer 'Oh I've no time to bother with those damn things.' Bennett had gone dead in the opposite direction.

I had never met him but I knew he was a young man in his early thirties. I had heard a lot about his skill, his business acumen, and about his reputation as a bon viveur. He was, they said, a dedicated devotee of the work-hard-play-hard school.

The Veterinary Hospital was a long low building near the top of a busy street. I drove into a yard and knocked at a door in the corner. I was looking with some awe at a gleaming Bentley dwarfing my own battered little Austin when the door was opened by a pretty receptionist.

'Good evening,' she murmured with a dazzling smile which I thought must be worth another half-crown on the bill for a start. 'Do come in, Mr Bennett is expecting you.'

I was shown into a waiting room with magazines and flowers on a corner table and many impressive photographs of dogs and cats on the walls – taken, I learned later, by the principal himself. I was looking closely at a superb study of two white poodles when I heard a footstep behind me. I turned and had my first view of Granville Bennett.

He seemed to fill the room. Not over tall but of tremendous bulk. Fat, I thought at first, but as he came nearer it seemed to me that the tissue of which he was composed wasn't distributed like fat. He wasn't flabby, he didn't stick out in any particular place, he was just a big wide, solid, hard-looking man. From the middle of a pleasant blunt featured face the most magnificent pipe I had ever seen stuck forth shining and glorious, giving out delicious wisps of expensive smoke. It was an enormous pipe, in fact it would have looked downright silly with a smaller man but on him it was a thing of beauty. I had a final impression of a beautifully cut dark suit and sparkling shirt cuffs as he held out a hand.

'James Herriot!' He said it as somebody else might have said 'Winston Churchill'.

Bennett proceeds to operate on Dinah the spaniel – who is no relation to Alf's real dog Dinah who appears in a later book – expertly removing a mass around her womb within minutes. James watches on, taking in the white-tiled walls and rows of gleaming

instruments, and is suddenly reminded that this was the kind of work he had envisaged for himself when he first started training in veterinary practice, and yet here he is, a ‘shaggy cow doctor’. But he then realizes that the life he has is one of magical fulfilment: ‘I would rather spend my days driving over the unfenced roads of the high country than stooping over that operating table.’

While they wait for the spaniel to wake up from the anaesthetic, the two vets pop into the ‘old boys’ club’ across the road from the practice. Bennett orders pints for them, and drains his with amazing speed, while James desperately tries to keep up, downing four pints in total. They then head to Bennett’s house, Granville pushes James towards a leather armchair and disappears off to the kitchen to sort out some grub for them.

Immensely gratified, Granville hurried through to the kitchen again. This time when he came back he bore a tray with an enormous cold roast, a loaf of bread, butter and mustard.

‘I think a beef sandwich would go down rather nicely, Jim,’ he murmured as he stropped his carving knife on a steel. Then he noticed my glass of whisky still half full.

‘C’mon, c’mon, c’mon!’ he said with some asperity. ‘You’re not touching your drink.’ He watched me benevolently as I drained the glass then he refilled it to its old level. ‘That’s better. And have another onion.’

I stretched my legs out and rested my head on the back of the chair in an attempt to ease my internal turmoil. My stomach was a lake of volcanic lava bubbling and popping fiercely in its crater with each additional piece of onion, every sip of whisky setting up a fresh violent reaction. Watching Granville at work, a great wave of nausea swept over me. He was sawing busily at the roast, carving off slices which looked to be an inch thick, slapping mustard on them and enclosing them in the bread. He hummed with contentment as the pile grew. Every now and then he had another onion.

‘Now then, laddie,’ he cried at length, putting a heaped plate at my elbow. ‘Get yourself round that lot.’ He took his own supply and collapsed with a sigh into another chair.

He took a gargantuan bite and spoke as he chewed. ‘You know Jim, this is something I enjoy – a nice little snack. Zoe always leaves me plenty to go at when she pops out.’ He engulfed a further few inches of sandwich. ‘And I’ll tell you something, though I say it myself, these are bloody good, don’t you think so?’

‘Yes indeed.’ Squaring my shoulders I bit, swallowed and held my breath as another unwanted foreign body slid down to the ferment below.

Just then I heard the front door open.

‘Ah, that’ll be Zoe,’ Granville said and was about to rise when a disgracefully fat Staffordshire bull terrier burst into the room, waddled across the carpet and leaped into his lap.

‘Phoebles, my dear, come to daddykins!’ he shouted. ‘Have you had nice walkies with Mummy?’

The Staffordshire was closely followed by a Yorkshire terrier which was also enthusiastically greeted by Granville.

‘Yoo-hoo, Victoria, yoo-hoo!’

The Yorkie, an obvious smiler, did not jump up but contented herself with sitting at her master’s feet, baring her teeth ingratiatingly every few seconds.

I smiled through my pain. Another myth exploded; the one about these specialist small animal vets not being fond of dogs themselves. The big man crooned over the two little animals. The fact that he called Phoebe ‘Phoebles’ was symptomatic.

Alf and Denton Pette became good friends and Alf trusted Pette so much that he asked him to put down one of his much-loved dogs, Hector. A Jack Russell terrier, Hector replaced Alf’s previous dog Dinah who had died in 1963. Hector was an immensely energetic dog, who accompanied Alf on his daily rounds, barking as they drove around, and, despite becoming virtually blind aged five or six, he always had a zest for life. Of all the dogs Alf shared his life with, Hector was his favourite and appeared in many photographs with the vet when he became a famous author. With suspected cancer of the oesophagus, fourteen-year-old Hector was put to sleep by Denton Pette, who also agreed to bury him in his garden in Aldborough St John.

Cats also feature in the James Herriot books – most farms keep a cat or two, as do the villagers and townsfolk of Darrowby. Alf was used to having cats around and his friend and colleague Brian Sinclair, the real Tristan, had something of a soft spot for the creatures and the pair frequently treated feline patients when they were brought in. Cats can be difficult to catch or handle and Alf took great pride in his technique of ‘wrapping’ cats so he could examine them, as he did with the stray cat Alfred in Vet in Harness.

I had heard of the Bonds, of course. They were Londoners who for some obscure reason had picked on North Yorkshire for their retirement. People said they had a ‘bit o’ brass’ and they had bought an old house on the outskirts of Darrowby where they kept themselves to themselves – and the cats. I had heard that Mrs Bond was in the habit of taking in strays and feeding them and giving them a home if they wanted it and this had predisposed me in her favour, because in my experience the unfortunate

feline species seemed to be fair game for every kind of cruelty and neglect. They shot cats, threw things at them, starved them and set their dogs on them for fun. It was good to see somebody taking their side.

My patient on this first visit was no more than a big kitten, a terrified little blob of black and white crouching in a corner.

‘He’s one of the outside cats,’ Mrs Bond boomed.

‘Outside cats?’

‘Yes. All these you see here are the inside cats. The others are the really wild ones who simply refuse to enter the house. I feed them of course but the only time they come indoors is when they are ill.’

‘I see.’

‘I’ve had frightful trouble catching this one. I’m worried about his eyes – there seemed to be a skin growing over them, and I do hope you can do something for him. His name, by the way, is Alfred.’

‘Alfred? Ah yes, quite.’ I advanced cautiously on the little half-grown animal and was greeted by a waving set of claws and a series of open-mouthed spittings. He was trapped in his corner or he would have been off with the speed of light.

Examining him was going to be a problem. I turned to Mrs Bond. ‘Could you let me have a sheet of some kind? An old ironing sheet would do. I’m going to have to wrap him up.’

‘Wrap him up?’ Mrs Bond looked very doubtful but she disappeared into another room and returned with a tattered sheet of cotton which looked just right.

I cleared the table of an amazing variety of cat feeding dishes, cat books, cat medicines and spread out the sheet, then I approached my patient again. You can’t be in a hurry in a situation like this and it took me perhaps five minutes of wheedling and ‘Puss-pussing’ while I brought my hand nearer and nearer. When I got as far as being able to stroke his cheek I made a quick grab at the scruff of his neck and finally bore Alfred, protesting bitterly and lashing out in all directions, over to the table. There, still holding tightly to his scruff, I laid him on the sheet and started the wrapping operation.

This is something which has to be done quite often with obstreperous felines and, although I say it, I am rather good at it. The idea is to make a neat, tight roll, leaving the relevant piece of cat exposed; it may be an injured paw, perhaps the tail, and in

this case of course the head. I think it was the beginning of Mrs Bond's unquestioning faith in me when she saw me quickly enveloping that cat till all you could see of him was a small black and white head protruding from an immovable cocoon of cloth. He and I were now facing each other, more or less eyeball to eyeball, and Alfred couldn't do a thing about it.

As I say, I rather pride myself on this little expertise and even today my veterinary colleagues have been known to remark: 'Old Herriot may be limited in many respects but by God he can wrap a cat.'

As it turned out, there wasn't a skin growing over Alfred's eyes. There never is.

'He's got a paralysis of the third eyelid, Mrs Bond. Animals have this membrane which flicks across the eye to protect it. In this case it hasn't gone back, probably because the cat is in low condition – maybe had a touch of cat flu or something else which has weakened him. I'll give him an injection of vitamins and leave you some powder to put in his food if you could keep him in for a few days. I think he'll be all right in a week or two.'

James visits Mrs Bond many more times, as she adds more stray cats to her collection, naming many of the toms after Arsenal players. James is adept at coaxing nervous cats out of their hiding places, knowing that it's mainly fear that makes them lash out. Boris, however, is particularly ferocious.

Boris was an enormous blue-black member of the outside cats and my bête noire in more senses than one. I always cherished a private conviction that he had escaped from a zoo; I had never seen a domestic cat with such sleek, writhing muscles, such dedicated ferocity. I'm sure there was a bit of puma in Boris somewhere.

It had been a sad day for the cat colony when he turned up. I have always found it difficult to dislike any animal; most of the ones which try to do us a mischief are activated by fear, but Boris was different; he was a malevolent bully and after his arrival the frequency of my visits increased because of his habit of regularly beating up his colleagues. I was forever stitching up tattered ears, dressing gnawed limbs.

We had one trial of strength fairly early. Mrs Bond wanted me to give him a worm dose and I had the little tablet all ready held in forceps. How I ever got hold of him I don't quite know, but I hustled him onto the table and did my wrapping act at lightning speed, swathing him in roll upon roll of stout material. Just for a few seconds I thought I had him as he stared up at me, his great brilliant eyes full of hate. But as I pushed my loaded forceps into his mouth he clamped his teeth viciously down on them and I could feel claws of amazing power tearing inside the sheet. It was all over in moments. A long leg shot out and ripped its way down my wrist, I let go my tight hold of the neck and in a flash Boris sank his teeth through the gauntlet into the ball of my

thumb and was away. I was left standing there stupidly, holding the fragmented worm tablet in a bleeding hand and looking at the bunch of ribbons which had once been my wrapping sheet. From then on Boris loathed the very sight of me and the feeling was mutual.

In Vet in a Spin a teenage girl brings in a badly injured tabby cat. As it appears to be a stray, no one is sure how it has been injured. It may have been hit by a car or even struck or kicked by a person – such acts of cruelty a sad and all-too-common occurrence with cats. Alf and Donald, like most veterinary practices, saw their fair share of strays brought in by the public – including injured cats, birds, and even hedgehogs, which they would have to treat for free unless someone claimed them.

‘It’s a cat,’ Tristan said. He pulled back a fold of the blanket and I looked down at a large, deeply striped tabby. At least he would have been large if he had had any flesh on his bones, but ribs and pelvis stood out painfully through the fur and as I passed my hand over the motionless body I could feel only a thin covering of skin.

Tristan cleared his throat. ‘There’s something else, Jim.’

I looked at him curiously. For once he didn’t seem to have a joke in him. I watched as he gently lifted one of the cat’s hind legs and rolled the abdomen into view. There was a gash on the ventral surface through which a coiled cluster of intestines spilled grotesquely onto the cloth. I was still shocked and staring when the girl spoke.

‘I saw this cat sittin’ in the dark, down Brown’s yard. I thought ’e looked skinny, like, and a bit quiet and I bent down to give ’im a pat. Then I saw ’e was badly hurt and I went home for a blanket and brought ’im round to you.’

‘That was kind of you,’ I said. ‘Have you any idea who he belongs to?’

The girl shook her head. ‘No, he looks like a stray to me.’

The cat is so badly injured, with its intestines spilling out and covered in dirt, that the kindest plan is to put the poor thing out of its misery. But when Tristan gently strokes the cheek of the cat, he and James are astonished to hear it purr. Tristan insists they do what they can to clean and stitch up the perforated intestines, aware that they’re probably fighting a lost cause.

Two hours and yards of catgut later, we dusted the patched-up peritoneal surface with sulphonamide and pushed the entire mass back into the abdomen. When I had sutured muscle layers and skin everything looked tidy but I had a nasty feeling of sweeping undesirable things under the carpet. The extensive damage, all that contamination – peritonitis was inevitable.

‘He’s alive, anyway, Triss,’ I said as we began to wash the instruments. ‘We’ll put him on to sulphapyridine and keep our fingers crossed.’ There were still no antibiotics at that time but the new drug was a big advance.

The door opened and Helen came in. ‘You’ve been a long time, Jim.’ She walked over to the table and looked down at the sleeping cat. ‘What a poor skinny little thing. He’s all bones.’

‘You should have seen him when he came in.’ Tristan switched off the sterilizer and screwed shut the valve on the anaesthetic machine. ‘He looks a lot better now.’

She stroked the little animal for a moment. ‘Is he badly injured?’

‘I’m afraid so, Helen,’ I said. ‘We’ve done our best for him but I honestly don’t think he has much chance.’

‘What a shame. And he’s pretty, too. Four white feet and all those unusual colours.’ With her finger she traced the faint bands of auburn and copper-gold among the grey and black.

Tristan laughed. ‘Yes, I think that chap has a ginger tom somewhere in his ancestry.’

Helen smiled, too, but absently, and I noticed a broody look about her. She hurried out to the stock room and returned with an empty box.

‘Yes . . . yes . . .’ she said thoughtfully. ‘I can make a bed in this box for him and he’ll sleep in our room, Jim.’

‘He will?’

‘Yes, he must be warm, mustn’t he?’

‘Of course.’

Later, in the darkness of our bed-sitter, I looked from my pillow at a cosy scene; Sam in his basket on one side of the flickering fire and the cat cushioned and blanketed in his box on the other.

As I floated off into sleep it was good to know that my patient was so comfortable, but I wondered if he would be alive in the morning . . .

Over the next few days, Helen assiduously tends to the weak cat, spooning in milk, baby foods and various liquids. The cat remains entirely still, day after day, but still purrs, until eventually he gets up and gradually grows into the handsome cat he once

was. Helen decides she wants to keep him and to call him Oscar and from that day ‘his purr became part of our lives’. He becomes firm friends with their dog Sam, but they constantly worry when he keeps disappearing. They then realize that when he goes missing, he is in fact visiting the pub, the church house and various places around town – he is simply a sociable cat, known to many in town, and always returns to Skeldale House.

From that night our delight in him increased. There was endless joy in watching this facet of his character unfolding.

He did the social round meticulously, taking in most of the activities of the town. He became a familiar figure at whist drives, jumble sales, school concerts and scout bazaars. Most of the time he was made welcome, but was twice ejected from meetings of the Rural District Council who did not seem to relish the idea of a cat sitting in on their deliberations.

At first I was apprehensive about his making his way through the streets but I watched him once or twice and saw that he looked both ways before tripping daintily across. Clearly he had excellent traffic sense and this made me feel that his original injury had not been caused by a car.

Taking it all in all, Helen and I felt that it was a kind stroke of fortune which had brought Oscar to us. He was a warm and cherished part of our home life. He added to our happiness.

When the blow fell it was totally unexpected.

I was finishing the evening surgery. I looked round the door and saw only a man and two little boys.

‘Next, please,’ I said.

The man stood up. He had no animal with him. He was middle-aged, with the rough weathered face of a farm worker.

He twirled a cloth cap nervously in his hands.

‘Mr Herriot?’ he said.

‘Yes, what can I do for you?’

He swallowed and looked me straight in the eyes. ‘Ah think you’ve got ma cat.’

‘What?’

‘Ah lost ma cat a bit since.’ He cleared his throat. ‘We used to live at Missdon but ah got a job as ploughman to Mr Horne of Wederly. It was after we moved to Wederly that t’cat went missin’. Ah reckon he was tryin’ to find ’is way back to his old home.’

‘Wederly? That’s on the other side of Brawton – over thirty miles away.’

‘Aye, ah knaw, but cats is funny things.’

‘But what makes you think I’ve got him?’

He twisted the cap around a bit more. ‘There’s a cousin o’ mine lives in Darrowby and ah heard tell from ’im about this cat that goes around to meetin’s. I ’ad to come. We’ve been huntin’ everywhere.’

‘Tell me,’ I said. ‘This cat you lost. What did he look like?’

‘Grey and black and sort o’ gingery. Right bonny ’e was. And ’e was allus goin’ out to gatherin’s.’

A cold hand clutched at my heart. ‘You’d better come upstairs. Bring the boys with you.’

Helen was putting some coal on the fire of the bed-sitter.

‘Helen,’ I said. ‘This is Mr – er – I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.’

‘Gibbons, Sep Gibbons. They called me Septimus because ah was the seventh in family and it looks like ah’m goin’ t’same way ’cause we’ve got six already. These are our two youngest.’ The two boys, obvious twins of about eight, looked up at us solemnly.

I wished my heart would stop hammering. ‘Mr Gibbons thinks Oscar is his. He lost his cat some time ago.’

My wife put down her little shovel. ‘Oh . . . oh . . . I see.’ She stood very still for a moment then smiled faintly. ‘Do sit down. Oscar’s in the kitchen, I’ll bring him through.’

She went out and reappeared with the cat in her arms. She hadn’t got through the door before the little boys gave tongue. ‘Tiger!’ they cried. ‘Oh, Tiger, Tiger!’

The man’s face seemed lit from within. He walked quickly across the floor and ran his big work-roughened hand along the fur.

‘Hullo, awd lad,’ he said, and turned to me with a radiant smile. ‘It’s ’im, Mr Herriot. It’s ’im awright, and don’t ’e look well!’

With heavy hearts, Helen and James return Oscar to his original owners but Helen is particularly upset about having to let him go. The story was inspired by a real stray cat, also named Oscar, which turned up at Alf and Joan’s house. He stayed for a few weeks but sadly disappeared, never to be seen again.

After Oscar left their lives, no more cats would live with Alf until he and Joan were visited by two strays, which made themselves at home in a log shed in the garden of their house in Thirlby. This feline pair, Olly and Ginny, star in Every Living Thing.

During the next few weeks they came close to Helen as she fed them but fled immediately at the sight of me. All my attempts to catch Ginny to remove the single little stitch in her spay incision were fruitless. That stitch remained for ever and I realized that Herriot had been cast firmly as the villain of the piece, the character who would grab you and bundle you into a wire cage if you gave him half a chance.

It soon became clear that things were going to stay that way because, as the months passed and Helen plied them with all manner of titbits and they grew into truly handsome, sleek cats, they would come arching along the wall top when she appeared at the back door, but I had only to poke my head from the door to send them streaking away out of sight. I was the chap to be avoided at all times and this rankled with me because I have always been fond of cats and I had become particularly attached to these two. The day finally arrived when Helen was able to stroke them gently as they ate and my chagrin deepened at the sight.

Usually they slept in the log shed but occasionally they disappeared to somewhere unknown and stayed away for a few days and we used to wonder if they had abandoned us or if something had happened to them. When they reappeared, Helen would shout to me in great relief, ‘They’re back, Jim, they’re back!’ They had become part of our lives.

Summer lengthened into autumn and when the bitter Yorkshire winter set in we marvelled at their hardiness. We used to feel terrible, looking at them from our warm kitchen as they sat out in the frost and snow, but no matter how harsh the weather, nothing would induce either of them to set foot inside the house. Warmth and comfort had no appeal for them.

When the weather was fine we had a lot of fun just watching them. We could see right up into the log shed from our kitchen, and it was fascinating to observe their happy relationship. They were such friends. Totally inseparable, they spent hours licking each other and rolling about together in gentle play and they never pushed each other out of the way when they were given their food. At nights we could see the two furry

little forms curled close together in the straw.

Months pass without any thawing of relations between James and the two stray cats. The vet then notices that Olly's fur is becoming knotted and tangled and resolves to catch him so he can take the cat down to the surgery. He leaves his favourite food, raw haddock, on the wall, and an open cage nearby. As the cat eats it, Helen strokes him and then James manages to grab him by the scruff of the neck and somehow thrust him into the cage 'amid a flurry of flailing black limbs'. At the surgery, under anaesthetic, they snip, trim and clip, and he emerges with lustrous smooth fur. Olly, however, distrusts James even more, scurrying away whenever he opens the back door. James, nonetheless, gradually and very cautiously starts feeding the cats, until Olly eventually allows James to stroke him.

Tragedy strikes when Olly is discovered in the garden having suffered some kind of stroke or seizure, from which he never recovers. It's a huge blow, particularly for Ginny who is now entirely alone, and James and Helen are distressed to see her looking for Olly for weeks afterwards. James resolves to make friends with Ginny, but he knows he's taking on a long and maybe hopeless challenge.

For a long time, although she accepted the food from me, she would not let me near her. Then, maybe because she needed companionship so desperately that she felt she might as well even resort to me, the day came when she did not back away but allowed me to touch her cheek with my finger as I had done with Olly.

After that, progress was slow but steady. From touching I moved week by week to stroking her cheek then to gently rubbing her ears, until finally I could run my hand the length of her body and tickle the root of her tail. From then on, undreamed-of familiarities gradually unfolded until she would not look at her food until she had paced up and down the wall top, again and again, arching herself in delight against my hand and brushing my shoulders with her body. Among these daily courtesies one of her favourite ploys was to press her nose against mine and stand there for several moments looking into my eyes.

It was one morning several months later that Ginny and I were in this posture – she on the wall, touching noses with me, gazing into my eyes, drinking me in as though she thought I was rather wonderful and couldn't quite get enough of me – when I heard a sound from behind me.

'I was just watching the veterinary surgeon at work,' Helen said softly.

'Happy work, too,' I said, not moving from my position, looking deeply into the green eyes, alight with friendship, fixed on mine a few inches away. 'I'll have you know that this is one of my greatest triumphs.'