

Every Living Thing – Chapter Fourteen

James Herriot

Sometimes, when our dog and cat patients died, the owners brought them in for us to dispose of them. It was always a sad occasion and I had a sense of foreboding when I saw old Dick Fawcett's face.

He put the improvised cat box on the surgery table and looked at me with unhappy eyes.

'It's Frisk,' he said. His lips trembled as though he was unable to say more.

I didn't ask any questions, but began to undo the strings on the cardboard container. Dick couldn't afford a proper cat box, but he had used this one before, a home-made affair with holes punched in the sides.

I untied the last knot and looked inside at the motionless body. Frisk. The glossy, black, playful little creature I knew so well, always purring and affectionate and Dick's companion and friend.

'When did he die, Dick?' I asked gently.

He passed a hand over his haggard face and through his straggling grey hairs. 'Well, I just found 'im stretched out by my bed this morning. But....I don't rightly know if he's dead yet, Mr Herriot.'

I looked again inside the box. There was no sign of breathing. I lifted the limp from on to the table and touched the cornea of the unseeing eye. No reflex. I reached for my stethoscope and placed it over the chest.

'The heart's still going, Dick, but it's a very faint beat.'

'Might stop at any time, you mean?'

I hesitated. 'Well, that's the way it sounds, I'm afraid.'

As I spoke, the little cat's rib cage lifted slightly then subsided.

'He's still breathing,' I said, 'but only just.' I examined the cat thoroughly and found nothing unusual. The conjunctiva of the eye was a good colour. In fact, there was no abnormality.

I passed a hand over the sleek little body. 'This is a puzzler, Dick. He's always been so lively – lived up to his name, in fact, yet here he is, flat out, and I can't find any reason for it.'

'Could he have 'ad a stroke or summat?'

'I suppose it's just possible, but I wouldn't expect him to be totally unconscious. I'm wondering if he might have had a blow to the head.'

'I don't think so. He was as right as rain when I went to bed, and he was never out during t'night.' The old man shrugged his shoulders. 'Any road, it's a poor look out for 'im?'

'Afraid so, Dick. He's only just alive. But I'll give him a stimulant injection and then you must take him home and keep him warm. If he's still around tomorrow morning, bring him in and I'll see how he's going on.'

I was trying to strike an optimistic note, but I was pretty sure that I would never see Frisk again and I knew the old man felt the same.

His hands shook as he tied up the box and he didn't speak until we reached the front door. He turned briefly to me and nodded. 'Thank ye, Mr Herriot.'

I watched him as he walked with shuffling steps down the street. He was going back to an empty little house with his dying pet. He had lost his wife many years ago – I had never known a Mrs Fawcett – and he lived alone on his old age pension. It wasn't much of a life. He was a quiet, kindly man who didn't go out much and seemed to have few friends, but he had Frisk. The little cat had walked in on him six years ago and had transformed his life, bringing a boisterous, happy presence into the silent house, making the old man laugh with his tricks and playfulness, following him around, rubbing against his legs. Dick wasn't lonely any more, and I had watched a warm bond of friendship growing stronger over the years. In fact, it was something more – the old man seemed to depend on Frisk. And now this.

Well, I thought, as I walked back down the passage, it was the sort of thing that happened in veterinary practice. Pets didn't live long enough. But I felt worse this time because I had no idea what ailed my patient. I was in a total fog.

On the following morning, I was surprised to see Dick Fawcett sitting in the waiting room, the cardboard box on this knee.

I stared at him, 'What's happened?'

He didn't answer and his face was inscrutable as we went through to the consulting room and he undid the knots. When he opened the box I prepared for the worst. But to my astonishment the little cat leaped out on the table and rubbed his face against my hand, purring like a motorcycle.

The old man laughed, his thin face transfigured. 'Well, what d'ye think of that?'

'I don't know what to think, Dick.' I examined the little animal carefully. He was completely normal. 'All I know is that I'm delighted. It's like a miracle.'

'No, it isn't,' he said. 'It was that injection you gave 'im. It's worked wonders. I'm right grateful.'

Well, it was kind of him, but it wasn't as simple as that. There was something here I didn't understand, but never mind. Thank heaven it had ended happily.

The incident had receded into a comfortable memory when, three days later, Dick Fawcett reappeared at the surgery with his box. Inside was Frisk, motionless, unconscious, just as before.

Totally bewildered, I repeated the examination and then the injections and on the following day the cat was normal. From then on, I was in the situation which every veterinary surgeon knows so well – being involved in a baffling case and waiting with a feeling of impending doom for something tragic to happen.

Nothing did happen for nearly a week, then Mrs Duggan, Dick's neighbour telephoned.

'I'm ringing on behalf of Mr Fawcett. His cat's ill.'

'In what way?'

‘Oh, just lyin’ stretched out, unconscious like.’

I suppressed a scream. ‘When did this happen?’

‘Just found ‘im this morning. And Mr Fawcett can’t bring him to you – he’s poorly himself. He’s in bed.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. I’ll come round straight away.’

And it was just the same as before. An almost lifeless little creature lying prone on Dick’s bed. Dick himself looked terrible – ghastly white and thinner than ever – but he still managed to smile.

‘Looks like ‘e needs another of your magic injections, Mr Herriot.’

As I filled my syringe, my mind seethed with the thought that there was indeed some kind of magic at work here, but it wasn’t my injection.

‘I’ll drop in tomorrow, Dick,’ I said. ‘And I hope you’ll be feeling better yourself.’

‘Oh, I’ll be awright as long as t’little feller’s better.’ The old man stretched out a hand and stroked the cat’s shining fur. The arm was emaciated and the eyes in the skull-like face were desperately worried.

I looked around the comfortless little room and hoped for another miracle.

I wasn’t really surprised when I came back next morning and saw Frisk darting about on the bed, pawing at a piece of string which the old man was holding up for him. The relief was great but I felt enveloped more suffocatingly than ever in my fog of ignorance. What the hell was it? The whole thing just didn’t make sense. There was no known disease with symptoms like these. I had a strong conviction that reading a whole library of veterinary books wouldn’t help me.

Anyway, the sight of the little cat arching and purring round my hand was reward enough, and for Dick it was everything. He was relaxed and smiling.

‘You keep getting’ him right, Mr Herriot. I can’t thank you enough.’ Then the worry flickered again in his eyes. ‘But he is goin’ to keep doin’ it. I’m frightened he won’t come round one of these times.’

Well, that was the question. I was frightened too, but I had to try and be cheerful. ‘Maybe it’s just a passing phase, Dick. I hope we’ll have no more trouble now.’ But I couldn’t promise anything and the frail man in the bed knew it.

Mrs Duggan was showing me out when I saw the district nurse getting out of her car at the front door.

‘Hello, Nurse,’ I said, ‘you’ve come to have a look at Mr Fawcett? I’m sorry he’s ill.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, poor old chap. It’s a great shame.’

‘What do you mean? Is it something serious?’

‘Afraid so.’ Her mouth tightened and she looked away from me. ‘He’s dying. It’s cancer. Getting rapidly worse.’

‘My God! Poor Dick. And a few days ago he was bringing his cat to my surgery. He never said a word. Does he know?’

‘Oh yes, he knows, but that’s him all over, Mr Herriot. He’s as game as a pebble. He shouldn’t have been out, really.’

‘Is he...is he...suffering?’

She shrugged. 'Getting a bit of pain now, but we're keeping him as comfortable as we can with medication. I give him a shot when necessary and he has some stuff he can take himself if I'm not around. He's very shaky and can't pour from the bottle into the spoon. Mrs Duggan would gladly do it for him, but he's so independent.' She smiled for a moment. 'He pours the mixture into a saucer and spoons it up that way.'

'A saucer...?' Somewhere in the fog a little light glimmered. 'What's in the mixture?'

'Oh, heroin and pethidene. It's the usual thing Dr Allison prescribes.'

I seized her arm. 'I'm coming back in with you, Nurse.'

The old man was surprised when I reappeared. 'What's the matter, Mr Herriot? Have you left summat?'

'No, Dick, I want to ask you something. Is your medicine pleasant tasting?'

'Aye, it's nice and sweet. It isn't bad to take at all.'

'And you put it in a saucer?'

'That's right. Me hand's a bit dothery.'

'And when you take it last thing at night there's sometimes a bit left in the saucer?'

'Aye, there is, why?'

'Because you leave that saucer by your bedside, don't you, and Frisk sleeps on your bed...'

The old man sat very still and stared at me. 'You mean the little beggar licks it out?'

'I'll be my boots he does.'

Dick threw back his head and laughed. A long, joyous laugh. 'And that sends 'im to sleep! No wonder! It makes me right dozy, too!'

I laughed with him. 'Anyway, we know now, Dick. You'll put that saucer in the cupboard when you've taken your dose, won't you?'

'I will that, Mr Herriot. And Frisk will never pass out like that again?'

'No, never again.'

'Eee, that's grand!' He sat up in bed, lifted the little cat and held him against his face. He gave a sigh of utter content and smiled at me.

'Mr Herriot,' he said, 'I've got nowt to worry about now.'

Out in the street, as I bade Mrs Duggan goodbye for the second time, I looked back at the little house. 'Nowt to worry about, eh? That's rather wonderful, coming from him.'

'Oh aye, and he means it, too. He's not bothered about himself.'

I didn't see Dick again for two weeks. I was visiting a friend in Darrowby's little cottage hospital when I saw the old man in a bed in a corner of the ward.

I went over and sat down by his side. His face was desperately thin, but serene.

'Hello, Dick,' I said.

He looked at me sleepily and spoke in a whisper. 'Now then, Mr Herriot.' He closed his eyes for a few moments, then he looked up again with the ghost of a smile. 'I'm glad we found out what was wrong with t'little cat.'

'So am I, Dick.'

Again a pause. 'Mrs Duggan's got 'im.'

‘Yes, I know. He has a good home there.’

‘Aye...aye...’ The voice was fainter. ‘But often I wish I had ‘im here.’ The bony hand stroked the counterpane and his lips moved again. I bent closer to hear.

‘Frisk...’ he was saying, ‘Frisk...’ Then his eyes closed and I saw that he was sleeping.

I heard next day that Dick Fawcett had died, and it was possible that I was the last person to hear him speak. And it was strange, yet fitting, that those last words were about his cat.

‘Frisk...Frisk....’