

Boots – James Herriot

‘Hello! Hello!’ I bellowed.

‘Hello! Hello!’ little Jimmy piped just behind me.

I turned and looked at my son. He was four years old and had been coming on my rounds with me for over a year.

This shouting was a common habit of mine. When a vet arrived on a farm, it was often surprisingly difficult to find the farmer.

Jimmy had caught on to the problem quite early and there was no doubt that he enjoyed the opportunity to exercise his lungs a bit. I watched him now as he strutted importantly over the cobbles, giving tongue every few seconds. He was also making an unnecessary amount of noise by clattering on the rough stones with his new boots.

Those boots were his pride and joy. When I first began to take him round with me, his reaction was the simple joy of a child at being able to see animals of all kinds, particularly the young ones – a huddle of kittens in the straw or a dog with puppies. But before long he wanted to help. He delighted in handing out the tins of stomach powder, the long cartons of Universal Cattle Medicine.

The farmers were kind, as they always are with young people. Even the most uncommunicative would grunt, ‘Ah, see you’ve got t’apprentice with ye,’ as we got out of the car.

But those farmers had something which Jimmy desperately wanted; their big hobnailed boots. He had a great admiration for farmers in general; strong, hardy men who spent their lives in the open and their boots seemed to symbolize for Jimmy the characters of the men who wore them.

Matters came to a head one day when we were talking in the car. ‘Daddy,’ he said, ‘can I have some boots?’

‘Boots? But you’ve got some already, haven’t you?’ I pointed down at his Wellingtons.

He gazed at his feet sadly before replying, ‘Yes, I know, but I want proper boots like the farmers.’

This was difficult. ‘But Jim, little boys like you don’t have boots like that. Maybe when you’re bigger.....’

‘Oh, I want proper boots now,’ he moaned in anguished tones.

At first I thought it was a passing whim, but he kept up his pleas. As Helen, my wife, put on his wellington boots each morning, disgusted looks and a listless slouching conveyed the message that his footwear was entirely unsuitable for a man. Finally Helen and I talked it over one night.

‘They surely don’t have farm boots in his size, do they?’ I asked.

Helen shook her head. ‘I wouldn’t have thought so, but I’ll look around in any case.’

I couldn’t believe it when within a week my wife returned flushed with success and bearing the smallest pair of farm boots I had ever seen. I couldn’t help laughing. They were so tiny, yet so perfect; thick, hobnailed soles, chunky uppers and a long row of lace holes with metal loops at the top.

Jimmy didn’t laugh when he saw them. He handled them with awe and to see him striding

round a farmyard in corduroy leggings and those boots you would think he owned the place. He clumped and stamped, held himself upright, and his cries of ‘Hello! Hello!’ took on a new authority.

He was never what I would call naughty – but he had that bit of devil which I support all boys need to have. There was one afternoon when Mr Garrett brought his sheepdog in. The animal was very lame, and as I hoisted him onto the table in the consulting room, a small head appeared for a moment at the surgery window.

I didn’t mind that. Jimmy often watched me dealing with our small animal patients and I half expected him to come into the room for a closer look.

It is often difficult to locate the source of a dog’s lameness but in this case I found it immediately. When I gently squeezed the outside pad of his left foot, he winced and a tiny bead of serum appeared on the black surface. ‘He’s got something in there, Mr Garrett,’ I said. ‘Probably a thorn. I’ll have to give him a shot of local anaesthetic and open up his pad.’

It was when I was filling the syringe that a knee came into view at the corner of the window. I felt a pang of annoyance, Jimmy surely couldn’t be climbing up the wisteria. It was dangerous and expressly forbidden. The branches of the beautiful creeper curled all over the back of the house, and though they were as thick as a man’s leg near ground level, they became quite slender as they made their way up to the roof. I decided that I was mistaken and began to work on the dog’s pad. The modern anaesthetics worked very quickly and within a minute or two I reached for the scalpel. With the point of my blade I made a careful nick in the tough tissue of the pad – and at that moment a shadow crossed the window. I glanced up. It was Jimmy alright. The little blighter *was* on the wisteria, but there was nothing I could do about it then, except give him a quick glare. I was drawing the scalpel across at right angles to my first gut when from the corner of my eye I spotted two feet dangling just below the top of the window. The feet swung and kicked repeatedly, obviously for my benefit. At last they disappeared, which could only mean that their owner was climbing higher into the dangerous regions. I dug a little deeper and swabbed with cotton wool.

Ah yes, I could see something now, but it was very deep, probably the tip of a thorn which had broken off well below the surface. I reached for the forceps and just then Jimmy’s head showed itself, upside down this time; he was hanging by his feet from the branches and the face was positively leering. This was too much. I shook my fist violently. My fury must have startled Jimmy because his face vanished instantly and I could hear faint sounds of feet scrambling upwards.

I forced myself back to my task. ‘Sorry, Mr Garrett,’ I said. ‘Will you hold the leg up again, please?’

He replied with a thin smile and I pushed my forceps into the depths. They grated on something hard. I gripped, pulled gently, and, oh lovely, out came the pointed, glistening head of a thorn. I had done it. I was beaming at my client and patting the dog’s head when I heard the crack from above. It was followed by a long howl of terror as a small form hurtled past the window and thudded with horrid force into the garden.

I threw down the forceps and shot out of the room, through the side door into the garden.

Jimmy was already sitting up among the wallflowers and I was too relieved to be angry.

‘Have you hurt yourself?’ I gasped, and he shook his head.

I lifted him to his feet and felt him over carefully. There appeared to be no damage. ‘Go

along and see mummy,' I said, and returned to the consulting room.

I must have been deathly pale when I entered because Mr Garrett looked startled, 'Is he alright?' he asked.

'Yes, yes. I think so. But I do apologise for rushing out like that. It was really too bad of me to.....'

Mr Garrett laid his hand on my shoulder. 'Say no more, Mr Herriot. I have children of my own.'

And then he spoke the words which have become engraved on my heart, 'You need nerves of steel to be a parent.'

Later at tea, I watched my son demolishing a poached egg on toast. I thanked heaven he was no worse for his fall, but I still had to remonstrate with him. 'Look, young man,' I said. 'That was a very naughty thing you did out there. I've told you again and again not to climb the wisteria.'

Jimmy bit into his toast and regarded me impassively. I could see that whatever it was going to say he wasn't going to take it seriously.

'If you're going to behave like this,' I went on, 'I'm not going to take you round the farms with me. I'll just have to find another little boy to help me.'

His chewing slowed down and I looked for some reaction. 'Another little boy?' Jimmy inquired.

'That's right I'll have to find somebody else.'

Jimmy thought this over for a minute or two, and then he shrugged and appeared to accept the situation philosophically. He started to slap jam on a slice of bread.

Then in a flash his calmness evaporated. He looked up at me in wide-eyed alarm and his voice came out in a high quaver. 'Would he have my boots?'