

Piglets – James Herriot

It was 1947, the year of the great snow. I have never known snow like that before or since, and the odd thing was that it took such a long time to get started. Nothing happened in November and we had a green Christmas, but then it began to get colder and colder. At the beginning of February big, fat flakes started a steady relentless descent on our countryside. For weeks and weeks the snow fell. It transformed the roads into glassy tracks of flattened snow over which we drove at fifteen miles an hour.

To get our cases we did a lot of walking since so many of the farm tracks were blocked and there was no doubt that many animals died from lack of veterinary help. It was around the middle of March when helicopters were dropping food on isolated spots that Bert Kealey telephoned me. He was one of those who was out of reach on a high moor which was bleak even in summertime.

‘I though your phone wires would be down, Bert,’ I said, surprised.

‘Naw, they’ve survived, God knows how.’ The young farmers voice was cheerful as always. He ran a small herd of cows on the high tops and was one of the many who scratched a living from the unfriendly soil. ‘But ah’m in trouble,’ he went on. ‘Polly’s just had a litter and she hasn’t a drop of milk.’

‘Oh dear, that’s unfortunate,’ I said. Polly was the only pig on the Kealey farm.

‘Aye, it’s a beggar. Bad enough losin’ the litter – there’s twelve smashin’ little pigs – but it’s my Tess I’m bothered about.’

‘Yes....yes...’ I was thinking of Tess, too. She was Bert’s eight-year-old daughter and she had a thing about little pigs. She had persuaded her father to buy her a sow so that she could have a litter of her own. I could remember Tess’s excitement when she showed me her birthday present. ‘That’s Polly pig,’ she said, pointing to the sow nuzzling the straw in its pen. ‘She’s mine. My dad gave her to me.’

I leaned over the pen. ‘You’re a lucky girl. She looks a fine pig.’

‘Oh, she is, she is.’ The little girl’s eyes shone with pleasure. ‘I feed her every day and she lets me stroke her. She’s nice. And do you know something else? She’s going to have babies in March.’

‘Well I never!’ I said. ‘Is that so? You’ll have a whole lot of little pink pigs to look after.’ I held my hands a few inches apart. ‘Just about this size.’

She was so thrilled at the thought she was lost for words.

All this came back to me as I listened to Bert Kealey’s voice on the phone. ‘I guess she needs a shot of pituitrin to bring down the milk,’ I said, ‘but how the heck is she going to get it? Your districts been cut off for weeks now.’ Bert had to agree. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘Ah’ve tried diggin me road out, but it fills up as fast as I clear it.’

I thought for a moment. ‘There’s just one possibility,’ I said. ‘I could maybe get there on skis. I’ve been using them a bit lately. I can’t be sure that I’ll make it as far as your farm but I’ll try.’

‘By ‘eck. I’d be very grateful if you would, Mr Herriot. It’s t’little lass ah’m thinking of, she’d be heartbroken if they start dyin’.’

‘I know, Bert. I’ll have a go. I’ll leave straightaway.’

I manoeuvred my car as close as possible to the tall white walls which the snow ploughs had thrown up, got out and buckled on my skis. All I needed was the bottle of pituitrin and a syringe, and I put them in my pocket. I had slithered amateurishly for about half a mile when the snow started again. A swirling screen of flakes cut me off completely from my surroundings. There was not point in going on because I had lost all sense of direction. I was scared. If the snow didn't stop I could blunder for miles in that empty wilderness without coming upon a house.

The flurry stopped as suddenly as it had begun. My heart thumped as I stared around me, and the dark smudge of my car roof in the white distance was a sweet sight. I headed back to it with a speed worthy of an Olympic skier. Relief flowed through me as I threw my skis back into the back and started the engine, and I was well on the way home before my pulse rate returned to normal.

'Bert,' I said on the phone. 'I'm terribly sorry but I just couldn't make it. I got caught by a snow shower and had to turn back.'

'Well, ah'm glad ye did turn. Fellers have got lost and died in the snow up here. I shouldn't have let you try.' He paused for a moment and then said wistfully. 'If only there was some other way to make that pig let 'er milk down.'

I suddenly got an idea.

'Bert, I want you to get some warm water and soap.'

'Hey, hang on Mr Herriot, I'm no vet....'

'I know Bert, but listen, you can do it. Soap your arm well and then feel your way into Polly. Then gently massage the milk bar. That *might* start the milk flowing, and once it's started, it won't stop, and those little pigs will be saved.'

'Ok, I'll have a go,' he said.

I put down the phone and went through to have lunch. All through the meal I was on edge. I leapt to my feet at the sound of the phone ringing. It was Bert, breathless but triumphant. 'It worked, Mr Herriot! I did like you said. It was like magic.'

'Are the piglets feeding?'

'Not half! They're all laid quiet in a row, suckin' hard. It's lovely to see them.'

'Well, that's great,' I said.

The great snow of 1947 was followed by the most glorious summer I can remember. In late April the roads were clear and my journey to see on of Bert's heifers had none of the drama of last time. When I had finished my job, eight-year-old Tess took me through to see her beloved Polly the pig and family.

'They're pretty, aren't they?' she said as we looked into the pen at the twelve chunky little pigs playing around their mother.

'They certainly are, Tess,' I replied. 'Your first attempt at pig breeding has been a big success but I really think you have to hank your father for it. He did a wonderful job.'

Bert screwed up his face at the memory, 'Aye, maybe so. I didn't enjoy it but I reckon it was worth it.'