

It shouldn't happen to a vet – Chapter Ten

James Herriot

It was when I drove up to Mr Kay's farm for a tuberculin test and found half a dozen young heifers grazing contentedly at the far end of a large field that I felt an odd foreboding. This wasn't going to be my day!

'I thought you'd have them inside, Mr Kay,' I said apprehensively.

'Nay, nay,' he said, 'Ah didn't like to put them in on a grand 'ot day like this. We'll drive them up to that little house.' He pointed to a tumble down grey-stone barn at the summit of the long, steeply sloping pasture. 'Won't take many minutes.'

We made our way to the bottom of the field and got behind the heifers.

'Cush, cush!' cried Mr Kay.

'Cush, cush!' I added encouragingly, slapping my hands against my thighs.

The heifers stopped pulling the grass and regarded us with mild interest, their jaws moving lazily, then in response to further cries they began to meander casually up the hill. We managed to coax them up to the door of the barn but there they stopped. The leader put her head inside for a moment then turned suddenly and made a dash down the hill. The others followed suit immediately.

I looked thoughtfully at the young beasts thundering down the slope, their tails high, kicking up their heels like mustangs; they were enjoying this new game.

Down the hill once more and again the slow wheedling up to the door and again the sudden breakaway.

After the eighth descent I looked appealingly at Mr Kay.

'Look, we're getting nowhere,' I said. 'Isn't there anything more we can do?'

The farmer looked at me with mild surprise. 'Well, let's see. We could bring the dog out but he's nobbut a young 'un.'

He sauntered back to the farmhouse and opened a door.

A shaggy cur catapulted out, barking in delight, and Mr Kay brought him over to the field.

'Get away by!' he cried gesturing towards the cattle who had resumed their grazing and the dog streaked behind them. I really began to hope as we went up the hill with the hairy little figure nipping at their heels, but at the barn the rot set in again.

I could see the heifers beginning to sense the inexperience of the dog and one of them managed to kick him briskly under the chin. The little animal yelped and his tail went down. He stood uncertainly, looking at the beasts, advancing on him now, shaking their horns threateningly, then he seemed to come to a decision and slunk away.

The young cattle went after him at increasing speed and in a moment I was looking at the extraordinary spectacle of the dog going flat out down the hill with the heifers drumming close behind him. At the foot of the hill the little animal disappeared under a gate and we saw him no more.

Something seemed to give way in my head. 'Oh God,' I yelled, 'we're never going to

get these damn things tested! I'll just have to leave them.'

The farmer seemed to recognize that I was at breaking point. 'Aye, it's no good,' he said. 'We'll have to get Sam.'

'Sam?'

'Aye, Sam Broadbent. He'll get 'em in all right.'

'How's he going to do that?'

'Oh, he can imitate a fly.'

For a moment my mind reeled. 'Did you say imitate a fly?'

'That's right. A warble fly, tha' knows. He's a bit slow is t'lad but by gaw he can imitate a fly. I'll go and get him.'

Ten minutes later Mr Kay arrived back. Behind him was a large, fat man.

'Good morning,' I said and the big man turned slowly and nodded.

The heifers, standing near by, watched with languid interest as we came through the gate. They had obviously enjoyed every minute of the morning's entertainment and it seemed they were game for a little more fun if we so desired.

Sam paced solemnly forward. He made a circle of his thumb and forefinger and placed it to his lips, then he took a deep breath. And, from nowhere it seemed, came a sudden swelling of angry sound, a vicious humming and buzzing which made me look round in alarm for the enraged insect zooming in for the kill.

The effect on the heifers was electric. Their superior air vanished and was replaced by rigid anxiety; then, as the noise increased in volume, they turned and charged up the hill. But it wasn't the carefree frolic of before – no tossing heads, waving tails and kicking heels; this time they kept shoulder to shoulder in a frightened block.

Sam, Mr Kay and I directed them yet again up to the building where they formed a group, looking nervously around them.

At the top, Sam paused to regain his breath, fixed the animals with a blank gaze and carefully adjusted his fingers against his mouth. A moment's tense silence then the humming broke out again, even more furious and insistent than before.

The heifers knew they were beaten. With a chorus of startled bellows they turned and rushed in to the building and I crashed the door behind them; I stood leaning against it, unable to believe my troubles were over.

A few minutes after Sam had left us, I was happily clipping and injecting their necks.

I looked up at the farmer. 'You know, I can still hardly believe what I saw there. It was like magic. That chap has a wonderful gift.'

'Ay, he can imitate a fly all right,' said Mr Kay. 'Poor awd lad, it's t'only thing he's good at.'