

**brandy**– *James Herriot*

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.

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 in the can, but he made up for it by furious tail wagging.

'Oh, Mr Herriot, I am sorry to trouble you again,' Mrs Westby, his young mistress, smiled. 'I just can't keep Brandy out of that dustbin.'

Brandy was a huge, lolling, slightly goofy animal, and this dustbin raiding was an obsession. He liked to fish out a can and lick out the tasty remnants, but he often got stuck.

I gripped the edge of the lid with my forceps and gently bent it back until I was able to lift it away from his tongue. An instant later that same tongue was slobbering all over my cheek in 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 spoke sharply, but I saw that she was smiling. You just couldn't help liking Brandy, because he was a great ball of affection without an ounce of malice in him.

Brandy had other idiosyncrasies apart from his fondness of dustbins. His mistress told me a wonderful story.

'When Brandy first came as a tiny puppy, I spent hours nursing him on my knee,' she said, 'and I used to wear a certain sort of blue jeans a lot. Ever since, the very sight of those blue jeans makes him try to get on my knee. He knows perfectly well I can't have a full-grown Labrador in my lap. Sometimes he manages to get nearly all the way up,' she went on, 'and if he's been playing in the mud he makes an awful mess and I have to go and change. That's when he really does receive a scolding.'

Another of Brandy's favourite tricks was even more extraordinary. He loved going to the children's playground and sliding down the slide.

I often smiled to myself when I thought of Brandy's antics, but I didn't smile when Mrs Westby brought him to the surgery a few months later. His bounding ebullience had disappeared and he had to drag himself along the passage to the consulting room.

As I lifted him onto the table I noticed that he had lost a lot of weight.

'What is the trouble, Mrs Westby?' I asked.

She looked at me worriedly, 'He's been off colour for a few days now, listless and coughing and not eating very well, but this morning he seems quite ill and you can see he's starting to pant.'

'Yes.....yes.....'

I found his temperature was 104. I took my stethoscope and listened to his lungs. Wheezes, squeaks and bubblings – they were all there against a background of laboured respiration. I put the stethoscope back in my pocket.

'He's got pneumonia.'

'Oh dear. That's bad isn't it?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'But.....' Mrs Westby gave me an appealing glance. 'I understand it isn't so fatal since the new drugs came out.'

I hesitated. 'Yes, that's quite right. In humans and most animals the sulpha drugs and now penicillin have changed the picture completely, but dogs are still very difficult to cure.'

'But Brandy is so young and strong,' I went on, 'he must stand a fair chance. I wonder what started this off?'

‘He had a swim in the river about a week ago, Mr Herriot. I try to keep him out of the water in this cold weather, but if he sees a stick floating he just takes a dive into the middle.’

‘Was he shivery afterwards?’

‘He was. I walked him straight home but it was a freezing cold day. I could feel him trembling as I dried him down.’

I nodded. ‘That would be the cause all right. Anyway, I’m going to give him this injection of penicillin. Also, I want you to make him what we call a pneumonia jacket: cut two holes in an old blanket for his forelegs and stitch him into it along his back – he must have his chest warmly covered. Only let him out in the garden for necessities.’

I repeated the injection the following day. There wasn’t much change. I injected him for four more days and the realisation came to me sadly that Brandy wasn’t responding. The temperature did drop a little but he ate hardly anything and grew gradually thinner.

Brandy didn’t die. He survived, but you couldn’t put it any higher than that.

‘He isn’t Brandy anymore,’ Mrs Westby said a few weeks later when I called in. Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. ‘It breaks my heart to see him like this. He’s only five, but he’s like an old, old dog.’ She sniffed and blew her nose. ‘When I think of how I used to scold him for getting into the dustbins and muddying up my jeans, I wish he would do some of his funny old tricks. Now he doesn’t even want to go for a walk.’

As I watched, Brandy rose and pottered slowly over to the fire. He stood there for a moment, gaunt and dead-eyes before he coughed, groaned and flopped down on the hearth rug.

‘Do you think he’ll always be like this?’ Mrs Westby asked.

I shrugged, ‘We can only hope.’

Months went by, and the only time I saw the Labrador was when Mrs Westby was walking him on the lead, he seemed reluctant to move and his mistress had to stroll along very slowly so that he could keep up with her.

I managed to forget Brandy fairly well until one afternoon in February. I was looking out of my surgery window when I saw Brandy coming round the corner of the street with Mrs Westby. His nose was entirely obscured by a large, red, tomato soup can. I stared into Mrs Westby’s radiant face.

‘What.....what.....?’

‘Look, Mr Herriot, look! He’s better, he’s better!’

‘And I.....I suppose you’ll want me to get that can off him?’

‘Oh yes, yes please!’

Tomato soup must have been one of his favourites because he was really deeply embedded and it took some time before I was able to slide the can from his face. I fought off the slobbering attack.

‘He’s back in the dustbins, I see!’

‘Yes, he is, quite regularly. And he goes sliding with the children, too.’ She smiled happily. ‘But, Mr Herriot,’ Mrs Westby’s eyes were wide. ‘How on earth has this happened? How has he got better?’

I replied in tones of deep respect, ‘The healing powers of nature – something no veterinary surgeon can compete with when it decides to act.’

For a few seconds we were silent as we stroked the dog’s head.

‘Oh, by the way,’ I said. ‘Has he shown any renewed interest in your blue jeans?’

‘Oh, my word, yes! They’re in the sink at the moment, absolutely covered in mud. Isn’t it marvellous!’