

VET'S CHRISTMAS James Herriot

It was Christmas Eve. Tomorrow, I thought, a long lie in....and then a lazy day...oh bliss!

As I drifted into sleep I could hear the church bells ringing.

But now there was this other bell which wouldn't stop. Must be the alarm. But as I pawed at the clock the noise continued and I saw that it was six o'clock. It was the phone of course. I lifted the receiver. A hard voice, crisp and very wide awake, jarred in my ear "Is that the vet?"

"Yes Herriot speaking" I mumbled

This is Brown, Willet Hill. I've got a cow down with milk fever. I want you here quick."

"Right. I'll see to it."

"Don't take long" Then a click at the far end. Not a word of regret or apology. No 'sorry to get you out of bed' or anything else, never mind 'Merry Christmas'. It was just a bit hard.

Mr Brown was waiting for me in the darkness of the farmyard. He didn't say good morning but nodded briefly then jerked his head in the direction of the cowshed. "She's in there" was all he said.

He watched in silence as I gave the injections and it wasn't until I was putting the empty bottles into my pocket that he spoke. "Anything special about feeding?"

"No, she can have anything she likes."

As we crossed the yard he halted suddenly and turned to face me. Could it be that he was going to ask me in for a nice hot cup of tea? "That was a hell of a bill I had from you fellows last month." He said. "Tell your boss not to be so savage with his pen." Then he turned and walked quickly towards the house..

Well that was nice, I thought as I drove away. Not even thanks or goodbye, just a complaint. A sudden wave of anger surged in me. Farmers! There were some miserable devils among them.

As I mounted the steps of my lodgings the darkness had paled to a silvery grey. Mrs Hall, the housekeeper met me in the doorway. "I'm sorry" she said "There's another urgent job. Old Mr Kirby's got a bit of trouble with his nanny goat."

"Nanny goat!"

"Aye. He says she's choking."

"Choking! How the heck can she be choking?"

“I’m sure I don’t know. And I wish you wouldn’t shout at me, Mr Herriot. It’s not my fault.”

“I’m sorry Mrs Hall” I said. My feeling of goodwill was very low.

Mr Kirby was a retired farmer. He had always had goats even when he was running his dairy herd. He had a thing about them.

The cottage was in a village high up the dale. Mr Kirby met me at the gate.

“Ee lad,” he said “I’m right sorry to be bothering you this early in the morning and Christmas an’ all, but Dorothy’s real bad.”

He led the way to a stone shed in which we found a large white goat. As I watched the goat gave a series of coughs and then stood trembling. The farmer turned to me “You see I had to get you out, didn’t I? If I left her till tomorrow she’d be a goner.”

“You’re right, Mr Kirby,” I replied. “You couldn’t leave her. There’s something in her throat.”

We went into the pen and as the old man held the goat I gently forced her jaws apart. Suddenly she gave a curious loud, long drawn cry. I poked a finger deep into her throat. There was something there all right. I could just touch it but I couldn’t get hold of it.

After a few minutes I turned to the farmer. “You know this is a bit baffling “ I said “I can feel something in the back of her throat, but it’s soft—like cloth. But if its cloth what the heck is holding it there? Why hasn’t she swallowed it down?”

“Aye its rum isn’t it? Said the old man gently patting the unhappy animal. “Do you think she’ll get rid of it herself? Maybe it’ll just slip down?”

“No, I don’t. It’s stuck fast. I’ve got to get it out soon because she’s beginning to blow up. Look!” I pointed to the goat’s left side. “I’ll get my torch from the car.”

The old man held the torch as I once more pulled the goat’s mouth open and once again she made the curious cry. It was when she was in full cry that I noticed something under her tongue—a thin dark band.

“I can see what’s holding the thing now” I cried “It’s hooked round her tongue” Carefully I pushed my forefinger under the band and began to pull.

It began to stretch as I pulled....it was elastic.! Then it stopped stretching and I felt a real resistance...whatever was in the throat was beginning to move. I kept up a gentle pulling and very slowly the mysterious object came sliding up over the back of the tongue and into the mouth. When it came within reach I let go the elastic, grabbed the sodden mass and hauled it forth. It seemed as if there was no end to it--a long snake of dripping material nearly two feet long—but at last I had it out on the straw of the pen.

Mr Kirby seized it and held it up and, as he unravelled the mass, he gave a sudden cry.

“God help us, it’s me summer drawers!”

“Your what?”

“My summer drawers. Missus was having a clear out last week and she didn’t know whether to wash them or make them into dusters. She washed them at the finish and Dorothy must have got them off the line.” He held up the tattered shorts and regarded them ruefully. “By gaw, they’ve seen better days, I reckon our Dorothy’s finished them this time.”

He gave a great shout of laughter, and the goat gave a great belch and started to nibble at some hay.

The farmer gazed at her fondly “Isn’t that grand to see. She’s ready for her grub already. And if she hadn’t got her tongue round the elastic that lot would have gone right down and killed her.”

“I really don’t think it would you know “I said “It’s amazing what goats and other animals can carry around in their stomachs. I once found a bicycle tyre inside a cow when I was operating for something else. The tyre didn’t seem to bother her in the least.”

At that point Mr Kirby suddenly seized my arm “But I don’t know why I’m keeping you stood out here, lad. You must come in and have a bit o’ Christmas cake.”

Inside the tiny living room of the cottage I as ushered to the best chair by the fireside.

“Bring cake out for Mr Herriot, Mother” the farmer cried as he rummaged in the pantry. He reappeared with a bottle of whisky at the same time as his wife bustled in carrying a cake thickly laid with icing and ornamented with coloured spangles, toboggans reindeers.

Mr Kirby unscrewed the stopper. “You know Mother, we’re lucky to have such men as this to come out on a Christmas morning to help us.”

“Aye we are that” The old lady cut a thick slice of the cake and placed it on a plate by my side.

Drink in hand, cake on my knee I looked across at the farmer and his wife who were sitting in upright kitchen chairs watching me with quiet kindness. I raised my glass “A happy Christmas to you both” I said.

The old couple nodded and replied smilingly “And the same to you Mr Herriot”

Farmers, I thought. They were the salt of the earth.

