

# James Herriot

## Vet in a spin



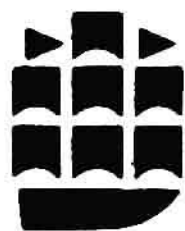
**Knockouts**

# **Vet in a spin**

**James Herriot**

*adapted by Josie Levine*

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## A flying start

This was a very different uniform. I climbed into the baggy flying suit, and pulled on the sheepskin boots and the gloves – the silk ones first, then the big clumsy pair on top. It was all new but I had a feeling of pride.

Leather helmet and goggles next, then I fastened on my parachute, passing the straps over my shoulders and between my legs, and

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buckling them against my chest before, shuffling out of the flight hut onto the long stretch of sunlit grass.

As we walked over the grass, I could see one of my friends coming in to land. The little biplane slewed and weaved crazily in the sky. It just missed a clump of trees, then, about fifty feet from the ground, it dropped like a stone, bounced high on its wheels, bounced twice again, then zig-zagged to a halt. The helmeted head in the rear cockpit jerked and nodded as though it were making some pointed remarks to the head in front.

The Tiger Moth looked very small and alone on the wide stretch of green. I climbed up and strapped myself into the cockpit. My instructor got in behind me. He went through the drill which I would soon know by heart like a piece of poetry. A fitter gave the propeller a few turns for priming. Then 'Contact!' The fitter swung the prop, the engine roared, the chocks were pulled away from the wheels, and we were away, bumping over the grass. Then suddenly and miraculously we were lifting and soaring high over the straggle of huts into the summer sky with the patchwork of the soft countryside of southern England unfolding beneath us.

## A FLYING START

Flying Officer Woodham's voice came over the intercom.

'Now you've got her. Take the stick and hold her steady. Watch the artificial horizon and keep it level. See that cloud ahead? Line yourself up with it and keep your nose on it.'

I gripped the joystick in my gauntleted hand. This was lovely. And easy, too. They had told me flying would be a simple matter, and they had been right. It was child's play. Cruising along, I glanced down at the grandstand of Ascot racecourse far below.

I was just beginning to smile happily when a voice crashed in my ear.

'Relax, for God's sake! What the hell are you playing at?'

I couldn't understand him. I felt perfectly relaxed and I thought I was doing fine. But in the mirror I could see my instructor's eyes glaring through his goggles.

'No, no, no! That's no bloody good! Relax, can't you hear me, relax!'

'Yes, sir,' I quavered and immediately began to stiffen up.

I couldn't imagine what was troubling the man but as I began to stare with increasing desperation, now at the artificial horizon then at the nose of the aircraft against the



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cloud ahead, the noises over the intercom became increasingly apoplectic.

I didn't seem to have a single problem, yet all I could hear were curses and groans and on one occasion the voice rose to a scream.

'Get your bloody finger out, will you!'

I stopped enjoying myself, and a faint misery welled in me. And as always when that happened, I began to think of Helen and the happier life I had left behind.

It was early November, and a golden autumn had changed with brutal suddenness to arctic cold. For two weeks an icy rain had swept the grey towns and villages which huddled in the folds of the Yorkshire Dales, turning the fields into shallow lakes and the farmyards into squelching mud-holes.

Everybody had colds. Some said it was flu, but whatever it was, half of Darrowby seemed to be in bed and the other half sneezing at each other.

I myself was on a knife edge, crouching over the fire, sucking an antiseptic lozenge, and wincing every time I had to swallow. My throat felt raw and there was an ominous tickling at the back of my nose. I shivered as the rain hurled itself against the window.

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I was all alone in the practice. Siegfried had gone away for a few days and I just daren't catch cold. It all depended on tonight. If only I could stay indoors and then have a good sleep, I could throw it off. But as I glanced over at the phone on the bedside table, it looked like a crouching beast ready to spring.

Helen was sitting on the other side of the fire, knitting. It was a sweater for me, about half done.

'How does it look, Jim?' she asked.

I smiled and opened my mouth to tell her it was simply smashing when the phone pealed with a suddenness which made me bite my tongue.

Tremblingly I lifted the receiver. Horrid visions of calving heifers floated before me. An hour with my shirt off would just tip me nicely over the brink.

'This is Sowden of Long Pasture,' a voice croaked.

'Yes, Mr Sowden?'

I gripped the phone tightly. I would know my fate in a moment.

'I 'ave a big calf 'ere. Looks very dowly and gruntin' bad. Will ye come?'

A long breath of relief escaped me. A calf with probable stomach trouble. It could have

been a lot worse.

‘Right, I’ll see you in twenty minutes,’ I said.

As I turned back to the cosy warmth of the little room, the injustice of life smote me.

‘I’ve got to go out, Helen.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Yes, and I have this cold coming on,’ I whimpered. ‘And just listen to that rain!’

‘Yes, you must wrap up well, Jim.’

I scowled at her.

‘That place is ten miles away, and a cheerless dump if ever there was one. There’s not a warm corner anywhere.’

‘I’m really sorry, Jim,’ she said. ‘But maybe it won’t take you long. And you can have a bowl of hot soup when you get back.’

I nodded sulkily. Yes, that was something to look forward to. So I kissed her, and trailed off into the night.

When I saw Mr Sowden, I realised that I was really quite fit. He had obviously been suffering from the flu for some time, but like most farmers he just had to keep going at his hard ceaseless work. He looked at me from swimming eyes, gave a couple of racking coughs that almost tore him apart, and led me into the buildings. He held an oil lamp

high as we entered a lofty barn, and in the feeble light, I discerned various rusting farm implements, a heap of potatoes and another of turnips, and in a corner a makeshift pen where my patient stood.

It wasn't the two week old baby calf I had half expected, but a little animal of six months. It had all the signs of a 'bad doer' – thin and pot-bellied with its light roan coat hanging in a thick overgrown fringe below its abdomen.

'Allus been a poor calf,' Mr Sowden wheezed, between coughs. 'Never seemed to put on flesh. Rain stopped for a bit this afternoon, so ah let 'im out for a bit of fresh air and now look at 'im.'

I climbed into the pen and, as I slipped the thermometer into the rectum, I studied the little creature. He offered no resistance as I gently pushed him to one side, his head hung down and he gazed at the floor from deep sunk eyes. Worst of all was the noise he was making. It was more than a grunt – more like a long, painful groan repeated every few seconds.

'It certainly looks like his stomach,' I said. 'Which field was he in this afternoon?'

'I nobbut let 'im have a walk round t'orchard for a couple of hours.'



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'I see,' I looked at the thermometer. The temperature was subnormal. 'I suppose there's a bit of fruit lying around there.'

Mr Sowden went into another fit of coughing, then leaned on the boards of the pen to recover his breath.

'Aye, there's apples and pears all over t'grass. Had a helluva crop this year.'

I put the stethoscope over the rumen, and instead of the normal surge and bubble of the healthy stomach, I heard only a deathly silence. Everything in his stomach was impacted.

'Well, Mr Sowden, I think he's got a bellyful of fruit and it's brought his digestion to a complete halt. He's in a bad way.'

The farmer shrugged.

'Well, if 'e's just a bit bunged up a good does of linseed oil 'ud shift 'im.'

'I'm afraid it's not as simple as that,' I said. 'This is a serious condition.'

'Well, what are we goin' to do about it, then?' he said, wiping his nose, and looking at me morosely.

I hesitated. It was bitterly cold in the old building and already I was feeling shivery and my throat ached. The thought of Helen and the bec-sitter and the warm fire was unbearably attractive. But I had seen impactions like

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this before and tried treating them with purgatives, and it didn't work. This animal's temperature was falling to the danger level and he had a sunken eye. If I didn't do something drastic, he would be dead by morning.

'There's only one thing will save him,' I said. 'And that's a rumenotomy.'

'A what?'

'An operation. Open up his first stomach and clear out all the stuff that shouldn't be there.'

'Are you sure? D'ye not think a good pint of oil would put 'im right? It 'ud be a lot easier.'

It would indeed. For a moment the fireside and Helen glowed like a jewel in a cave, then I glanced at the calf. Scraggy and long-haired, he looked utterly unimportant, infinitely vulnerable and dependent. It would be the easiest thing in the world to leave him groaning in the dark till morning.

'I'm quite sure, Mr Sowden. He's so weak that I think I'll do it under a local anaesthetic, so we'll need some help.'

The farmer nodded slowly.

'Awright, ah'll go down t'village and get George Hindley,' he said, coughing again, painfully. 'But by gaw, ah could do without

this tonight. Ah'm sure I've got brown chitis.'

Brown chitis was a common malady among the farmers of those days and there was no doubt this poor man was suffering from it, but my pang of sympathy faded as he left, because he took the lamp with him, and the darkness closed tightly on me.

Dales farmers are never in a hurry and I hadn't expected a quick return, but after fifteen minutes in the impenetrable blackness, bitter thoughts began to assail me. Where the hell was the man? Maybe, he and George Hindley were brewing a pot of tea for themselves, or perhaps settling down to a quick game of dominoes. My legs were trembling by the time the oil lamp reappeared in the entrance, and Mr Sowden ushered his neighbour inside.

'Good evening, George,' I said. 'How are you?'

'Only moderate, Mr Herriot,' the newcomer sniffled. 'This bloody caud's just – ah – ah – whooosh – just gettin' a haud o' me.'

He blew lustily into a red handkerchief and gazed at me blearily. I looked around me.

'Well, let's get started. We'll need an operating table. Perhaps you could stack up a few straw bales?'

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The two men trailed out and returned, carrying a couple of bales apiece. When they were built up, they were about the right height but rather wobbly.

I blew on my freezing fingers and stamped my feet.

‘We could do with a board on top. Any ideas?’

Mr Sowden rubbed his chin.

‘Aye, we’ll get a door.’

He shuffled out into the yard with his lamp, and I watched him struggling to lift one of the cow byre doors from its hinges. George went to give him a hand and as the two of them pulled and heaved, I thought wearily that veterinary operations didn’t trouble me all that much – but getting ready for them was a killer.

Finally the men staggered back into the barn, and laid the door on top of the bales. The operating theatre was ready.

‘Let’s get him up,’ I gasped.

We lifted the unresisting little creature onto the improvised table, and stretched him on his right side. Mr Sowden held his head while George took charge of the tail and the rear end.

Quickly I laid out my instruments, removed



coat and jacket and rolled up my shirt sleeves.

‘Damn! We’ve no hot water. Will you bring some, Mr Sowden?’

I held the head, and again waited interminably while the farmer went to the house. This time it was worse without my warm clothing and the cold ate into me as I pictured the farm kitchen, and the slow scooping of the water from the side boiler into a bucket, and the unhurried journey back to the buildings.

When Mr Sowden finally reappeared, I added antiseptic to the bucket and scrubbed my arms feverishly. I clipped the hair on the left side and filled the syringe with local anaesthetic. I could hardly see.

I looked helplessly at the oil lamp balanced on a nearby turnip chopper.

‘That light’s in the wrong place,’ I said.

Wordlessly, Mr Sowden left his place, and began to tie a length of plough cord to a beam. He threw it over another beam, and made it fast, before suspending the lamp above the calf. It was a big improvement, but it took a long time, and by the time he had finished, I had abandoned all hope of ever throwing off my cold. I was frozen right through, and a burning sensation had started in my chest. I would soon be in the same state as my helpers.