

Chapter 5

The following day dawned bright but cold again. Jason yawned and stretched as he climbed out of bed and wandered across to the window. He pulled back the curtains and gazed out into the village. The local people passed by, going about their business without knowing that Jason was watching their progress. A group of children went by, running around one another and shouting in the fun of the new morning. Jason smiled as he watched them teasing one another and laughing as they made their way to somewhere.

A couple of ladies, burdened down with shopping bags and baskets, had stopped to chat in the street. Jason could only guess at the conversation. People came and went from the village store, carrying newspapers, bottles of milk and other sundry items they needed for their daily lives. An elderly man seemed to struggle under the weight of his purchases. Jason wondered if they really knew what was going on around their village and their lovely dale. What would they think, if they knew? He was pretty certain that 99.9% of people would be horrified by the cruelty in their midst!



Jason washed and pulled on his walking clothes. He descended the narrow staircase of the pub and entered the dining room. A full English breakfast later and Jason felt much better, and ready to face the day – whatever it should throw at him.

He wandered into the street and sat at his usual bench, awaiting the arrival of his new partner in this latest project. He watched as the mallard gracefully floated across the pond. They seemed to move without effort. Every so often, they'd upend and stretch down into the water, feeding upon whatever they could find. It seemed to Jason that, however much they ate, they never seemed to run out. Somehow, nature always seemed to provide for them. That was nature's way. As long as things were in balance, the world just carried on spinning and life just continued effortlessly. It was when *we* stuck our noses into things that they seemed to go wrong, Jason reflected. We just couldn't stop interfering with the world, and the results were often horrendous. Why couldn't we just learn to take better care of the planet we'd been lucky enough to inherit?



As Jason pondered, the figure of Will appeared and he strolled over to where the big RSPCA man had seated himself. "Morning," he called, merrily. "Off for a walk today, are we?" he asked, keeping up the pretense to be 'just another tourist.'

"Yeah," replied Jason, rising from the bench and falling into step with his companion.

Will glanced across at him. "Problem?" he probed.

"Na," replied Jason. "Just why can't some people leave the natural world alone to look after itself? It does a great job, as long as we don't interfere."

"Very profound for this time of the morning, Confucius," Will teased. "What's brought that on?"

<http://ancienthistory.mrdonn.org/Confucius.html>

"Oh, I don't know. I'm just wondering what we're going to face on this job," Jason responded. The two men strode on towards the farm in silence, each pondering on their brief conversation. What would happen? What would they see? What would they do? How would it all end?

They climbed the stile and wandered along the path – familiar now – to the farm buildings, where they'd promised to meet Dan. As they approached, they noticed a white vehicle parked by the barn. In the back window was a sign – 'Vet on Call'. The two men wandered over to the barn, where Dan was speaking to a man they guessed was the farmer. He was a short man, tanned and wrinkled, with a grey beard framing his face. He leant on a stick in one hand and held a smouldering pipe in the other. A worried look was etched upon his face. He shook his head miserably at intervals.



As the agents approached they could catch some of the conversation. "It doesn't have to be from the badgers," Dan was saying. "As far as we know, there is no bovine TB in badgers in this part of the country."

"Well. It's come from somewhere," farmer Green contended. "It's badgers that carry bTB."

"No," said Dan, it's not *just* badgers. It is caused by a bacterium which can also infect and cause TB in cattle, badgers, deer, goats, pigs, dogs and cats, as well as many other mammals. It could have come from any of those."

"I reckon I should just get my gun and go and shoot all those badgers," Mr Green roared.

"You can't do that, Mr Green," Dan advised. "It would get you up before the judge, I'm afraid. Could cost you £5000 per badger and six months as a guest of Her Majesty."

"Well, what alternative is there?" the old man grumbled.

"There are alternatives," explained Dan, softly, trying to keep the old man calm. Some Wildlife Trusts in the South West already vaccinate badgers. They trap them in cages and inject them. Of course, a vaccine they could eat would be better. We could just scatter it on the ground in peanuts. They'd certainly eat that! Peanuts are their big favourite! Defra reckon they are working on it, but it could be some time yet before it's ready. I don't know why. Scientists in New Zealand have managed to develop a vaccine to control possums in the same way. If *they* can do it, why can't we," Dan pondered.



"Time they got on with it then!" grumbled Mr Green.

"Of course, the best way to do it would be to invent a vaccine for cattle. But we still haven't quite got around to developing a 100% reliable test for bTB yet," Dan continued.

"You mean my cattle might not have the disease then?" the old man chirruped, looking more bright.

"Well, we'll have to wait for the final result from the vet. We won't know until he has decided," Dan said, cautiously. "To be honest, the best thing the government could do is to compensate farmers like you properly."

We also need to try to breed more resistant cattle, and to decide whether we really need to kill every cow that's carrying the disease. After all, the cow itself doesn't pose much of a risk to humans," Dan explained.

The vet emerged from the cow byre and strode over to them. "I think we *do* have a problem, Mr. Green," he pronounced. At least one of the herd looks like a reactor. To begin with the clinical signs of bovine TB, weakness, coughing and loss of weight are there. The lump test is not certain, but it looks bad."

"So how do they get it?" demanded Mr. Green.

"Well," replied the vet, "there is some debate surrounding bTB and the way it is passed on, but it is mainly a lung disease. It's caught by breathing in the bacteria that cause it. This generally happens when animals are kept in close contact, so it depends upon how many cattle are kept in a small area at any one time. The bacteria get into the air when animals cough and sneeze. It spreads to the others in the same way we can catch a cold when people don't use a tissue."

"So they have to cough and sneeze at each other," said the farmer. "Well, I've not seen them coughing and sneezing any more than usual."

"Transmission can happen nose-to-nose," the vet continued. "We think it can be indirect too, through saliva, urine, droppings, etc. They might catch it when feeding in the fields."

"One thing to consider," said Dan, "is that cattle don't like feeding near to badger dung pits, but badgers will readily turn over cow pats to look for grubs, beetles and worms. So we've got to consider which way infections travel. Who gives it to whom?"



Of course, it doesn't have to be badgers," Dan continued. "It could equally have come from the local deer population, for instance. At least 28% of deer carry it."

A badger dung pit

"Cattle won't feed near to deer," the farmer countered.

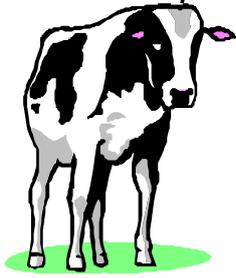
"Go to Google Images," said Dan, "Put in a search for cattle and deer. I think you'll find that that's an old wives tale."

"Of course, we need to consider the sheep too," the vet added. "Sheep and goats can be TB tested, at Defra's expense, if they live on a farm where TB has been confirmed in cattle. I can test the flock, if you'd like me to. Of course, I couldn't do it today. I'd need help."

"We'd be happy to lend a hand," offered Jason. The farmer looked at the SOU officers and grunted. Jason guessed that that was what passed as a thank you for the old man.

"So what happens now?" asked the old farmer, clearly upset by the possibility that his herd might have bTB.

"Your herd will be placed under movement restrictions and Defra will value and slaughter the reactors. In some cases we may also remove non-reactors who have been in direct contact with infected animals. The rest of your herd will have to undergo a series of tuberculin tests until we know for certain that the herd is free from infection and then restrictions can be lifted. It might be that the TB test might have to be followed with a gamma interferon test."



"You must not move cattle either onto or off the premises without a movement licence. We must also report all movements to the British Cattle Movement Service. You'll also have to ensure that milk from identified reactors does not enter the human food chain."

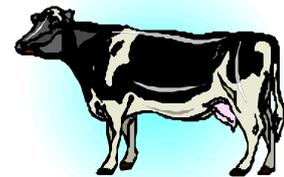
"Why me?" the farmer cried. "Why me?"

"It's not just you," the vet soothed. "We test around 5 ½ million cattle a year in this country. We see about 3½ thousand new incidents. More than 10% of cattle are under restrictions at any one time. Around 25,000 are slaughtered because of this disease. You are not alone, I'm afraid."

"What about my family?" the old man asked. "What is the chance of us getting it?"

"The risk of people contracting bTB from cattle is very low. Less than 1% of all confirmed cases of TB in humans are due to infection with bovine TB."

"That's a blessing, I suppose," said the old man, glumly. "Well, we'd better get on with the job." He turned to trudge back to the cow byre.



Dan called after him, "Mr Green, have all of your herd been born on the farm?"

The old man turned, looking frail and beaten. "Most," he whispered, "One or two have come in from outside to improve the gene pool."

The vet suddenly looked startled. "What? I thought you said they were all farm bred?"

"Aye, but yer need a decent bull from time to time. Like my new bull. He's sired some right good calves, that one," the old man disclosed.

"Where did you buy him from, Mr Green?" the vet probed.

"Got him at the mart. Came up from a bloke in the South West who breeds prize bulls like him."

The men looked from one to another. "I'll have to come back and test him again tomorrow," the vet announced. He was borderline on my tests, but I'll bet my life on it that this is where your bTB has come from. Most bTB in this country is focused around the South West. I'll need to see all of your paperwork for the bull, so that I can let them know about it in the South West."



first day! He'd provided the provided the old man with a terrible problem.

The men walked across to the fence. The prize bull was lying on the grass, chewing the cud. To look at him, you'd never guess that anything was wrong. He was a magnificent specimen, and Jason realised that this was the beautiful bull he'd seen through his binoculars on that elderly farmer with some lovely calves, but it seemed that he'd also

The old man walked sadly away, tears running down his grizzled cheeks. They all knew that he would struggle with this, particularly if any more of his beloved herd were to prove to be reactors. It could crush an old man

who had battled all of his life to farm in the unforgiving North Pennines to provide the people with the milk and meat they needed for a healthy diet. Life just seemed so unfair.

The vet returned to his vehicle and fussed around with his equipment, obviously also upset by the terrible news he had to serve on the farmer. It was never easy.

“How long do the movement restrictions last?” asked Will.

“If bTB can’t be confirmed in any of the reactors, or if restrictions are put in place because the TB test is overdue; then until the herd has one clear test. If bTB has been confirmed like this: until the herd has had two consecutive tests with ‘clear’ results,” the vet replied. He shook his head. “Poor old Green,” he said.

“If you need any help, just shout,” Dan said. The vet nodded and smiled a grim smile at the men. He climbed back into the 4 x 4 and drove along the track and out of the farm.

They turned their tracks towards the woods, heads bowed in thought. As they passed the cow byre, they could see old Mr Green leaning over one of the stalls, gently stroking the back of one of his cows – the reactor, they guessed.

Suddenly, Dan’s phone buzzed. He took it from his pocket and answered it. A female voice on the other end said, “Dan, where are you? I thought you were coming up to the setts.”

“We’re on our way,” replied Dan. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you when we get there.”

“Well, you’d better make it quick,” the voice exclaimed. “I think you’d better see this!”

