

TENDING CRITTERS IN THE RIDGES

by

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To Linda, my wonderful wife, for providing continual encouragement and support, for being a loving mother to our three sons Keith, Wyatt and Travis, and for instilling excitement and fun into all the lives she touches.

CHAPTER ONE

Some things creep into our lives that we hardly notice. The crack in the living room wall that everyone but you sees. The little gray hairs that sneak their way into existence. And, while we are at it, the gradual receding hairline. You know what I mean. We think they have always been there when, in actuality, they haven't been. We have become accustomed to them. They don't get much, if any, attention anymore. Then there are those things that happen with such abruptness they can't be ignored. They demand your attention and interfere with your efforts to do anything else until they are properly addressed. Car wrecks, dirty diapers and the like fall into this category. It's the latter classification I'm addressing here. That abruptness came to me in the form of an eighty pound prolapsed uterus from a fourteen hundred pound Charolais cow. The cow had strained so forcefully in her labor to deliver her calf that she had literally turned her uterus inside out and pushed it through the vagina. My task would be to clean the contaminated organ and replace it in its proper position within the cow.

I didn't know it at the time, but the farm call I was about to make would be life changing. It would help me bring together a whole collection of free floating and yet undefined ideas I had about what lay ahead of me as a veterinarian. I was the junior member of a two-man veterinary practice on James Island, South Carolina. My wife, Linda, our three boys, and I had moved there immediately after I graduated from veterinary school, and I had been rapidly initiated into the world of veterinary practice.

The day had started like any other day. Kurt, the practice owner, and I had seen the usual mixture of cases from the routine examinations and heartworm treatments to the more demanding ones that involved gunshot wounds, the adjustment of insulin dosage for a diabetic cat, and the fracture repair on a dog that had been run over by a pizza delivery truck in the owner's driveway. Then just as I was on my way home, hopefully for a quiet evening, the car phone rang.

"Hello."

"Is this the 'vetnary'?"

"Yes, it is. How can I help you?"

"Well, this is Ben Hugot and I've got a cow with the calf bed out...need you right away."

"Where are you located Mr. Hugot?"

"In Dorchester. Two miles east of the US 78 and 15 junction. You'll see my name on the box."

I didn't have to look at the map to know that was a forty-mile drive and it was already seven P.M. "Mr. Hugot, you'll have to find someone else. It would take me an hour to get there."

"Don't matter none if you're two hours away. You're the only 'vetnary' that's answered my call and the cow is in a heap of trouble."

The conversation didn't advance much. The telephone signal was poor, to say the least, and there was no way I was going to persuade the farmer to find someone else. In reality, our practice was the only one within service range. Right after Mr. Hugot gave me directions to his farm, I pulled into a convenience store, topped off the gas tank, and bought two packages of cheese crackers and a Coke. I knew this would have to substitute for dinner tonight. I called Linda and told her what was happening and to expect me when she saw me.

I hadn't traveled ten miles when the phone rang again.

"Hello."

“Dr. Brooks, this is Warren Smithcoat in Orangeburg. My mule’s got the colic something awful and needs tubing real bad.”

The name wasn’t familiar to me, but I felt the man knew a little about what treatment his mule needed by his use of the word ‘tubing.’ This was a common term used when a horse or mule was given mineral oil to move an irritant or blockage from the intestinal tract.

“Mr. Smithcoat, I’m on my way to another farm call in Dorchester and you’re fifty miles past that. It sounds like your mule needs attention, but there is absolutely no way I can do it tonight. You’ll have to transport your mule to Columbia to get the attention it needs.”

Now, I won’t go into Mr. Smithcoat’s response. He was not happy and his language would not have pleased the FCC. I gave him directions for transport and hung up before he could unload again.

The drive to the Hugot farm was picturesque. Live oak trees were in a splendor with moss cascading gracefully over their limbs. Mile after mile mirrored the same vista. The trees were beautiful especially where the limbs draped over the road creating almost an arbor effect. But the same view was endless, and I felt an emptiness I couldn’t identify. I fumbled for one of the cheese crackers and took a bite. “Stale,” I thought. Yes, that’s it. Stale: The scenery is stale. Gorgeous though it was, it lacked variety. I was used to the north Georgia mountains and the variety of hills and hollows and mountain streams, tall white maples, lady slippers on a mountain path, and a change of seasons. My thoughts seemed to dwell on such things during the hour drive. Finally, I reached the turn to the Hugot farm. In the distance I saw a man frantically waving a large white towel over his head. I drove straight toward him.

He was wearing a peculiar sort of hat that I hadn’t seen before. As I got closer, I could see it was a broad-rimmed straw hat with a mosquito net draped over it. He wore a long-sleeved dark shirt and his pants were tucked into rubber boots. I could barely make out his face but could see enough to know he had farmed for most of his sixty-plus years.

“What took you so long?” were the first words out his mouth.

I looked at the cow and was distressed at what I saw. Lying on her side and breathing rapidly, she was obviously on her way out without prompt attention. Mr. Hugot’s brash greeting, ‘What took you so long?’ took on a whole new meaning. The uterus was huge and grotesquely swollen and covered with grass, mud, and an assortment of manure and small twigs. To the touch, the tissue was dry and brittle. Small areas of blood dotted the organ from where it had been dragged and even stepped on before the poor beast finally collapsed from exhaustion. Her left side was upward and seemingly ready to burst from the massive gas buildup in her rumen. The rumen is the second compartment in a cow’s stomach. In this position the gas generated from the fermentation process that takes place in a cow’s digestive tract was trapped with no place to go. Her newborn calf was trembling under a live oak tree about fifty feet away.

I called out a list of commands as I ran to the truck. “Mr. Hugot, go back to your house and call another man to help us, and bring me five gallons of clean water, five pounds of sugar, and a sheet. Do you have any cows that have calved in the last couple days?”

“Sure do.”

“Great. Milk out a quart of colostrum and get another person to minister to that little calf over there.”

As the farmer drove away, I quickly surveyed the order of events that must take place if this cow was to have a chance at survival. The bloat condition was rapidly claiming her life. I had to remedy that first and with minimal stress to the animal. I had learned only too painfully that tubing a cow in this condition was a textbook solution that didn’t work in real life. It took too long and caused panic in an already stressed-out animal. I reached in the equipment drawer and gathered a small surgical pack, cleaning solution, and a special instrument designed just for this type case... a trocar. A trocar is nothing more than a hollow tube with a cutting tip on one end. After a brisk cleaning of the skin over the bulging rumen, I made a one-inch incision through the skin and then plunged the trocar through the flank muscles and rumen wall. The methane gas

released from the stomach erupted with such intensity that I had to hold the trocar forcefully in place to keep the instrument from dislodging. Once the pressure was released, I secured the trocar to the skin with sutures. This would prevent any further buildup of gas while I proceeded with the remainder of the treatment. The cow rose cautiously to a more normal resting position on her chest, and if a cow can smile like in the ads on TV, this cow would be one of those gifted ones with the contented look.

The easy work was over and so was the immediate threat of the cow dying. Next would come the painstaking process of cleaning the uterus and then replacing the organ back inside her. Whenever a uterus prolapses, it appears to double in size. It was like pouring ten gallons of water into a five-gallon container. The powerful arteries were still pumping blood into the organ while the veins had lost their ability to drain the surplus. Air exposure had dried the uterus and there was little to no muscle tone. Nothing could be done with the uterus at this point without the help of more manpower. A cow in this condition is low on calcium and would have to have a supplement to regain her strength. I went back to the truck and picked up a bottle of calcium solution and an intravenous administration set. The calcium would have to be given slowly to prevent heart problems. By that time, Mr. Hugot should have returned with help and we could get on to the task of replacing the uterus.

Once the solution was given, I expected to proceed directly to the clean-up and replacement work, but Mr. Hugot was nowhere to be found. It was 8:30 now and the mosquitoes and gnats had arrived in full force. In the distance was the sound of a tractor at full throttle. Mr. Hugot had pulled a trailer with him that had the five-gallon water container on it and two men hanging on for dear life as they bounced over the rough pasture.

He shut off the engine. "You got any idea how hard it is to find five pounds of sugar this time of night?"

"Never mind that. Did you get it?"

"Of course I did. You sent me out to get it, didn't you?"

"Great!" I said. "Back that trailer over here so the water is closer to and above the cow and give me the sheet. Who's got the colostrum?" He obliged as he demonstrated an uncanny ability to maneuver the attached trailer into the needed location.

Mr. Hugot eased himself from the tractor and put his hand on the shoulder of the man standing next to him. "This here is Jim from the next farm down the road and he's got the colostrum."

"See that calf over there, Jim?" I pointed to the tree. "The calf is hunkered down in there and is mighty weak. See if you can get it to nurse that bottle."

"Now this fine young man here is Bill Bob. I found him at the convenience store where I got the sugar and I hired him on the spot. I figured we was a'goin' need some muscle power."

"You're right", I said. We slid the sheet under the uterus and began the cleaning process. Mr. Hugot and Bill Bob suspended the uterus above the ground using the sheet as a sling as I poured water and soap across it.

"What was that?" I asked.

"What was what?" Hugot responded.

"It sounded like a thud...like something falling to the ground."

"I didn't hear anything. Besides, there's nothing to fall from except that tree over there where Jim and the calf are." Hugot said.

"O.K., lift the sheet a little higher so I can rotate this uterus a bit. O.K., that's good. Now, you can lower it a bit."

Even though I was wearing shoulder-length gloves, the whole process was still messy. The cow was in an upright position, resting on her chest, and I was in all sorts of contorted positions vigorously washing the uterus with soap and water. Finally, I had cleaned the uterus to my satisfaction and began to massage sugar into the organ's lining. The sugar would help pull the

excess fluid from the uterine tissue and shrink its enormous size. Only then would I be able to push the uterus through the vaginal opening and put it back where it belonged. Replacing a uterus is a labor-extensive job. It is exhausting work. I had done the procedure many times and never had any doubt about my ability to successfully restore the organ to its proper position. However, tonight I had the elements working against me. The humidity had jumped at least ten points and the mosquitoes by a factor of ten. They were biting me on every exposed part of my body, and the gnats were swarming in front of my face and in my eyes. I was envious of Mr. Hugot's hat.

"Lift the sheet a little higher. That'll help the blood flow back toward the body," I said as I stood briefly to relieve the discomfort in my back and knees. Then, I returned to the ground and continued the massage. Mercifully, the organ began to shrink and with ten more minutes of manipulation, the uterus slipped through the vagina and into its proper place within the abdomen. I grabbed two large antibiotic tablets, called boluses, and placed them in the uterus as I assured myself that the organ was fully distended and not partially folded on itself.

I ripped off my gloves, poured water over my head and rubbed frantically to relieve the itching sensation. The agony of my discomfort was lessened as I saw the cow struggle to her feet and stagger toward her calf. She completed the reunion with a cleaning swipe of her tongue to the calf's face.

"Don't want to do that anymore this time of night without a flashlight," Jim said.

"Why's that?" Mr. Hugot asked.

"Can't see the snakes."

"Snakes?" I said.

"That's right, snakes. There was a three-foot copperhead slithering down a limb when I pulled the calf from the bush. I didn't see him at first, but just sorta' got the feeling that something wasn't right. Then I saw him. I yelled out, but you fellows were so engrossed in what you were doing that you didn't hear me. Didn't have anything to defend myself so I just grabbed a stick, scooped it underneath him and flung him as far as I could."

"In which direction?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't really have much time to aim, you know."

"Which direction, Jim?" I asked again.

"Pretty much over this way, I reckon." Jim replied.

"That explains the thud," I thought to myself. I figured where there was one snake there would be more, and poisonous snakes were not my favorite members of the animal kingdom. In a few minutes I had gathered all my instruments and supplies. The cow and her calf had reunited and my work was finished.

"Well Mr. Hugot, it's late and there's no reason to dally around here with a loose snake on the prowl. I'll just gather my things and be on my way. The office will send you a bill later this week." Within five minutes I was on my way. The ride home was very long or so it seemed. All I could think about was a shower and some kind of ointment that would give me relief from the hundreds of mosquito bites I had endured.

When I got home I gave Linda a quick kiss on the cheek and went straight for the shower. Linda brought a towel in to me.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked.

"Yes, there is. Take the car this weekend and go to North Georgia and Western North Carolina and find us a home in the mountains."

"Are you serious?"

"I'll take care of the boys."

"All three?"

"Yes, all three."

"Really?" she said, knowing I must be desperate. "Throw in a shopping trip in Atlanta on the way and you've got yourself a deal."

As the hot water turned cold, I was shocked into reality about the hasty bargain I had just struck with Linda: three small boys, one still in diapers, for the entire weekend and my wife on an open-ended, unsupervised shopping trip in Atlanta. "What have I done?" I thought as I rushed from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around me. It was too late to withdraw the offer. Linda had already pulled out her suitcase and was making a list of needed additions to her limited wardrobe. Neither of us said anything, but we were both smiling at the prospect of moving back to the mountains.

