

CHAPTER TEN

BEAUTY – OR THE
BEAST?

As usual, the week had rolled around to Wednesday night before I knew it, and I prepared myself for the weekly Blue Cross onslaught. At quarter to five I was sitting in a comfortable armchair trying to remind myself why I did it. The clients would have another good hour before they would have to get ready to go out in the fierce winds and the dark rain that I couldn't ignore, no matter how hard I tried, beating against the window. Not for the first time I wondered why the Blue Cross couldn't expand to having a clinic in Wicklow.

One look at my bag was enough for Molly to break into an agonised wail. 'Mammy, make sick doggies better – Monny coming too!'

'No, Molly stay and mind Sluggie,' I reassured her firmly. I was having more success with the Maltesers I placed in her sticky fist, and feeling totally unrepentant of the buy-off.

Slug drooled hopefully, waiting for the inevitable titbit.

The journey seemed to go in slow motion as I shivered despite the thin trickle of heat I allowed myself in the car – no point in warming up too much.

Surely on such a night there won't be a big crowd, I consoled myself, in a vain attempt at self-delusion. And a delusion it was. From the far side of the roundabout I could see the assortment of teenagers with puppies, and old men with old dogs and young women with shivering children and somewhere in their midst an equally shivering pet.

I noticed a forlorn-looking budgie hopping miserably from one perch to the next, despairing at the variety of natural predators that surrounded him.

'Right, let the budgie in first,' I called above the din, ignoring the good-humoured protest that broke out.

'So, what seems to be the problem?' I enquired of the equally bedraggled young girl, clutching the cage as though her life depended on it.

'Ah nuttin', Doc. I just brought 'im for ye to have a look at 'im.'

I looked at her closely, trying to see if she was winding me up, but the big innocent eyes gazing up trustingly at me gave nothing away.

Gently, I tried to explain to her how such tiny birds have fairly delicate hearts and that even my handling him could be enough to make him keel over. 'Budgies don't like any change – he hates that wind and rain, so get him home and cover his cage with a large towel and keep him quiet for the rest of the night,' I finished, praying to God that the little creature wouldn't be belly-up by that stage.

‘Yeah, I know all dat, Doc,’ she called back over her shoulder as Eamon carefully ushered her down the big steps, ‘but de ye *like* ’im?’

I tried not to catch Gordon’s eye as the crowd surged through the open door.

Soon I was in the thick of it – clients pushing in from both doors – examining one patient while shouting medication doses to Gordon for the previous case. My stethoscope hung idly by, to be used only when absolutely necessary; no self-respecting stethoscope could even hope to pick up on any pathology over the constant roar of the evening traffic, muddled together with the wails and squawks and roars of the assorted assembly of animal life with which we were surrounded.

Nearing the end of the first hour, I felt we were making progress until I glanced out into the tiny waiting area and my eyes were drawn to the most ominous of all signs: a man with a pillowcase on his lap.

Over the next vomiting kitten and Jack Russell for suture removal, I tried to push the image of that pillowcase to the back of my mind, but as the terrier jumped happily off the table into the arms of her owner, there it was – the pillowcase – dumped unceremoniously in front of me.

The pretty pink floral borders did nothing to fool me. For as long as I could, I put off the moment, trying to judge from the thick bulk of the contents just how bad it could be.

‘A four-and-a-half-foot boa constrictor,’ declared the man proudly as I hesitatingly enquired.

A gasp of breath came from behind me as a young woman, clutching a scrawny kitten and desperately trying

to grasp the hands of her assortment of toddlers, shot out the door and, with a resounding slam, we were on our own – myself, the man, and the four-and-a-half-foot boa constrictor.

‘Need a hand?’ enquired Eamon, poking a head in the door.

‘Emm, yeah. Sure. Come on in,’ I answered, feeling in need of some moral support if nothing else.

The man seemed oblivious to my discomfort. ‘A real beauty he is,’ he began, his hand delving in among the pink printed flowers.

The reptilian smell assailed me before I even saw the head darting out, inquisitively flicking its forked tongue, assessing the situation.

‘A real beauty,’ he repeated, offering the muscular trunk towards me as I involuntarily stepped back almost falling into the press behind me, the pointed head a little too close for comfort.

‘So, em, what exactly seems to be the problem, then?’ I enquired, hastily pulling on a rare pair of disposable gloves and reminding myself of the oath in which we swore to care for all creatures, slithery or not!

Oblivious to the still considerable crowd outside, Freddie enthusiastically launched into the tale of how a mate of his had bought this snake from a pet shop, despite the fact that his wife wasn’t keen on it. Apparently, one evening, the snake had escaped from its enclosure and while the non-reptile-fancying wife was taking a bath, she spied the tail-end of it coiled neatly behind the toilet bowl.

‘Well, jeepers, me mate said ye’d want te have heard the

roars outa her. She wouldn't have yer man in the house after that,' he finished, nodding towards the mottled reptile winding its way up his arm.

'Strange that,' I murmured faintly, feeling deep sympathy for the unfortunate woman.

'So, he's just in for a check-up then?' I implored hopefully, wondering if I could conceivably go through the motions of examining the creature without touching it, even through Latex-lined hands.

'Well no, luv,' he replied, dashing all hopes. 'I've had the bugger for about two weeks now and 'e hasn't eaten at all. I've offered 'im the best of grub – got a few live chicks an' all – wouldn't look at them.'

I shuddered, imagining myself as the luckless chick.

Frantically, I racked my brains wondering how often a four-and-a-half-foot boa constrictor should eat. Two weeks did seem a bit long, but not totally famine-length either.

From my vantage point, the creature's scales did seem to be a bit dry and lifeless, but there was nothing lifeless about the rest of it as, with remarkable speed and agility, he slithered around Freddie's body, coiling and wrapping as best he knew.

'Well, maybe he's taking a bit of time settling into his new environment?' I began, buying myself a bit of time. 'He does look a bit dehydrated and, with the stress of the move, he's not shedding his coat properly,' I continued, feeling a little more confident that this ordeal would come to an end soon. 'What I would do is give him a bath in lukewarm water every second day to rehydrate him and

syringe a bit of this into him after it,' I replied, scribbling down the name of a reptile food supplement which would be available in the pet shop.

'That should get him back on his feet,' I concluded, missing the point that he didn't have any, and now frantic to conclude the consultation.

Freddie seemed happy enough with that. 'Right, luv. I'll do that so and, sure, if he's not eating I'll bring 'im back to ye again.'

I mumbled something that was not quite confirmatory but was feeling that I had got away lightly. Thankfully, I pulled off the still-clean pair of gloves, but Freddie turned back towards me and as an afterthought added, 'But are ye sure he 'asn't gotta touch o' mouth rot?' he said, thrusting the serpentine head towards mine. For an instant our eyes locked in mutual distrust before I recovered enough to pull myself away.

'Well, eh, I don't really think so,' I said cautiously as though X-ray specks were allowing me to examine the content of the mouth that was firmly latched shut.

'Would ye like me te open 'is mouth for ye?'

Maybe it was finally beginning to dawn on Freddie that I wasn't as enamoured of his 'beauty' as he was.

'Yes, good idea, so,' I blustered. 'I wouldn't like to frighten him.'

I studiously ignored Eamon's amused raised eyebrow as, taking a deep breath, I managed to peer into the gaping, one hundred and eighty degree jaws that were presented to me. Feeling a bit like that poor chick in its final moments, I could see clearly enough that the mouth

area was thankfully clear of infections that would require my intervention.

‘Perfect, perfect,’ I assured Freddie, hastily opening the door for the next client as he coiled his companion back into the floral print pillowcase.

Three or four clients had passed through before I could swallow without a gulp and the skin on the back of my neck stopped feeling quite so clammy.

‘Was tha’ a snake ye had in de bag?’ asked one enthusiastic young lad. ‘Deadly. Bleedin’ deadly!’ he said when I confirmed that it was.

‘Yeah ... deadly,’ I agreed, shuddering again.

On the long drive home I kept getting a shivery feeling down my spine and I did have a quick peek around the interior of the car before I got in. That night, I kept the duvet well wrapped around me, making sure there were no cracks and when Molly woke for her usual bottle, instead of running across the hall in my bare feet, I put on a pair of heavy duty slippers ... just in case.

The following Wednesday night came and went and although there was the usual assortment of life, there were no pink pillowcases. I breathed a sigh of relief when the last fluffy kitten had left.

I had all but forgotten my ordeal when, two weeks later, just as we were finishing up well beyond the allocated time as usual, Eamon called after me, ‘Hang on a sec, there’s someone after getting off that bus. Will we wait for them?’

‘Oh all right, so,’ I replied grudgingly, wondering who else would have arrived by the time we dealt with this one.

‘What is it?’ I called out the door, wondering what I needed to unpack.

Silence.

Eamon sounded sheepish when he came back in. ‘Are you sure you want to look at his one? We are well over time. We could always get him to come back next week or he could even go to Walkinstown tomorrow night. I’ll be on that clinic myself and I’m sure we could look after him there.’

I eyed him suspiciously – Eamon wasn’t usually prone to rambling, long night or not.

‘Sure, it’ll only take us a minute, Eamon. Call him in there.’

It struck me just before I saw it, this time not in a pink but in a yellow pillowcase, adorned with fluffy teddy bears. The beauty was back.

I flinched, as with a thump, the encased body hit the table.

‘No joy, luv. No joy at all,’ declared Freddie gloomily.

I couldn’t but agree with him.

‘We didn’t see you last week. I assumed all was well,’ I said with forced enthusiasm.

‘Nah, I tried to get over to ye but the bleedin’ bus was late and by the time I got here yiz were gone.’

‘Well, the clinic is only meant to be from seven to eight,’ pointed out Gordon, looking at his watch which showed that it was now looming dangerously close to nine. ‘You’re lucky that we’re still here at all – we should be sitting down in front of our fires by now.’

‘Ah thanks, lads,’ Freddie replied automatically. ‘It’s jus’

tha' he hasn't eaten at all since the last time and I've been doing me best, I have. Gave 'im a wash like yiz said.'

Despite myself, I felt sorry for the creature as Freddie pulled it out of the bag. The previously thick, muscular trunk looked gaunt and saggy and the skin was thickly scaled and dry. Even his movements were weak and listless, and he was apparently uninterested in his fate, as his head hung, barely level with the rest of his body. He was clearly a very sick snake and far beyond my feeble attempts at this stage. With a sense of relief, and knowing I was doing the right thing, I told Freddie that a referral to an exotics clinic was the only answer at this stage.

A long conversation ensued during which Freddie related his saga of how he had no means of transport to get across to the far side of the city and being on welfare he couldn't afford to pay much, and sure, anyway, the missus was getting fed up with the snake in the sitting room. After almost two hours at the clinic, my powers of persuasion were at their lowest ebb and with a sense of doom, I could feel what was coming next.

By quarter past nine, Freddie was gone and only the teddy-bear pillowcase remained behind, complete with my new in-patient. Beauty or not, Freddie had baled out.

Much and all as I feared the beast, I couldn't bring myself to put him to sleep. I wasn't concerned about getting a home for him as there are lots of people who like this kind of pet; but getting him better was going to be more difficult, plus the more immediate problem of what to do with him tonight.

Gordon and Eamon didn't even allow me to air my

brainwave that perhaps one of them would like a new pet.

'No, no,' Gordon assured me. 'What he needs now is a nice drive in the country. Nothing like a bit of fresh air to work up an appetite!'

The pair of them erupted into laughter at my desolate face.

I tried to bargain with myself, using all my logic. My phobia for snakes was ridiculous – pure childhood prejudice. Maybe this was my chance to break it. Maybe, in caring for this seriously ill animal, I would begin to bond with the species and get a better feel for them. Really, it was an excellent opportunity for me.

I wasn't convinced, but there was no other option and anyway, I told myself, he's so sick what harm can he do?

We got halfway home – as far as the canal – in relative tranquility, with Sidney, as I had christened him, hoping to make him seem friendlier, quietly coiled in his pillowcase on the passenger seat. The smell of reptile was growing, whether in my mind or in reality I'm not sure, so I opened the window to let in some Dublin fumes to overpower it. However, at the next bridge, it suddenly occurred to me that if he did escape he might make for the open crack, straight across my lap. Quickly, I closed the window again.

With one eye on the road and the other on the inert pillowcase, I drove on, trying to ignore the prickling sensation up the back of my neck. I was just crossing a busy intersection over the canal when, suddenly, I caught sight of the whole pillowcase rearing up and lurching towards me over the gear stick. In synchronicity with my body, the car swerved over the white line, amidst blasts of horns, while a cyclist skidded into the footpath. The edge of the

pillowcase was touching my leg, and part of the dense body of the snake had fallen down between the seat and the gear stick. With a shaking hand, I managed to pick the pillowcase up by the very edge and flick it back onto the seat while trying to get the car back into the correct lane.

The feeling of claustrophobia was growing in intensity with every passing mile. At the next junction, while waiting for the lights to change, I heard the gentle hissing sound, almost like the air being let out of a tyre. Through the well-worn material, I could see the outline of his head, upright, obviously as unimpressed with me as I was with him. At this stage I decided, for the sake of my fellow road users as much as myself, that Sidney would be better off in the boot. With the hazard lights flashing, I gingerly picked up the bag, and trying to ignore the still considerable weight of four-and-a-half feet of emaciated constrictor, I placed him gently in the boot, wedged between my vet bag and Molly's spare clothes bag, hoping she wouldn't object to the invasion.

My relief was short-lived. Out onto the Donnybrook road and there it was again ... I was sure, ever so faint, but surely that was the hissing noise again? With an indignant squeal, the car slammed to a halt and I jumped out, wondering how he had managed to escape. But when I checked the boot, there was no change. His dark silhouette was still where I had left it.

Back in car and this time I tried turning on the radio to drown out my over-active imagination. I flicked from my usual East Coast Radio until I hit the soothing notes of Lyric. I managed as far as Stillorgan before turning down

the volume and listening: nothing. And again: still nothing. Was he just silent or had he escaped – and was he, right now, at this moment, making his way up over the back seat towards me ...?

That's it, I thought to myself. Enough of this! I got out to reclaim Sidney from the boot. Back he went to the passenger side, but this time onto the floor where he couldn't move about as much.

We got as far as Cabinteely and in disbelief I stared at the long line of traffic ahead of me. At a quarter to ten at night, this could only mean one thing.

'Oh, why tonight?' I groaned. 'Of all nights to have a police checkpoint.' Mentally, I checked my tax and insurance and readjusted my safety belt.

'Now, you just stay there and don't move,' I threatened the pillowcase.

With the car slowed in the bumper-to-bumper queue, the smell seemed to get worse. When it was finally my turn to roll down the window, I was sure the guard couldn't miss the stench.

'Good evening, Miss,' drawled the guard with the tones of a man who was clearly not in a hurry.

Having caught up on the vital information of who I was and where I was going, he made his way in carefully measured steps to the windscreen and pointedly examined the discs, which were, thankfully, all in order. Just as he peered in the windscreen, Sidney, obviously getting bored with it all, started his antics again, tossing his head high within the constraint of his pillowcase as though trying to get back up on the seat.

‘Be quiet,’ I hissed at him, not knowing why as I didn’t think it was illegal to be carrying a snake around, but still, it was easier not to have to explain.

The guard frowned and with chest expanded and shoulders raised as though on the verge of making an important breakthrough, he came back to the driver’s window again and pushed his head in towards me.

‘May I ask who you were addressing, Miss?’ he asked in exaggerated monotones.

‘Who? Me? Oh, no one at all, Guard,’ I replied, my voice a bit high. ‘Just talking to myself, you know. Lonely drive on a late night, and all that.’

He peered at me through narrowed eyes and then casting his glance around the car, came across the pillowcase tied firmly in a knot on the floor.

‘And what have you got in the pillowcase?’

‘Oh, that?’ I said, voice rising again in forced gaiety. ‘Not much at all, Sir. Just a boa constrictor.’

His head shot back out the window and he stood upright again.

‘Do you know, Miss, that it is an offence to hinder the work of a member of the Garda Síochána?’

‘Really? Gosh, no! I never knew that. Wouldn’t dream of it though, your honour. Would you like to have a look?’

With perfect timing, Sidney made another strike, this time as though trying to execute the perfect back flip. The bag flopped over and, with an audible thump, hit off the passenger door.

I looked up, waiting for the guard to reply but, with a loud bang on my roof, he beckoned me on, only pausing

to add, 'The left front tyre is a bit bald,' as though I had committed a grievous felony.

I finally made it home in one piece and walked in the door to where Donal was peacefully watching a video.

'What's the pillowcase for?' he enquired.

'You won't believe it. But there was nothing I could do. I really had no option.'

With a sense of accustomed bewilderment he took the bag from me and opened it up to take a look inside, not noticing I had backed up against the far wall.

'Is it still alive?' I tried to quell the hope that rose within me.

'Oh it is,' he said, quickly closing the bag as Sidney obviously decided to introduce himself.

It took a while to get my old vivarium down out of the attic. Despite my aversion to snakes, I quite like lizards and had kept a pair of Bearded Dragons for many years. Luckily, their vivarium was still intact and although the ultraviolet light needed a new plug, the heat pads were all in perfect working order. Although the vivarium came complete with a solid, fitted lid with appropriate air holes, I placed the *Irish Times Atlas of the World* and a few other hefty volumes on top, just to be sure.

There was nothing more to be done with Sidney at that hour of the night, so having given him a spray of lukewarm water to make sure the humidity was right, we headed wearily to bed.

It took a while before I fell into a fitful slumber, working out the list of names I would ring in the morning to organise a new home for Sidney as quickly as possible.

* * *

It was the early hours of the morning before my disturbed dreams were interrupted by a loud banging noise and a heavy thump. In a panic, my first thought was that Molly had fallen out of her cot and I leapt out, forgetting all about our house guest. When I raced into Molly's room, there she lay, sleeping peacefully, covers thrown to one side but still clutching the furry cow that joined her each night. With a start, I remembered about the snake and looked down warily at my bare feet.

I walked cautiously through the rooms to try to find out what had made the noise. When I reached the sitting-room, I saw that a pile of books and assorted junk had fallen out of the large press which was home to any odds and ends that didn't fit anywhere else in the house. I had ransacked it earlier, looking for the heaviest possible books to put on top of Sidney's vivarium. With a sigh of relief, I started to stuff the collection back into the press.

In the silence of that hour of the morning, it was unmistakable – a loud hissing noise came from the back of the press. With a scream which might well have been audible in Ballyfermot, some forty miles away, I woke the household. In an instant, Slug and the other four dogs charged in, ready and able to defend me against anything. They were followed closely by Donal, just as Molly's bewildered wails broke out over the general confusion.

'The snake is in the press,' I yelled hysterically at Donal. 'He's hissing at me.' I stopped short as my eyes fell on the

vivarium where Sidney was clearly visible through the glass, sleeping peacefully, neatly coiled and oblivious to the pandemonium he was creating.

‘But he was, he was hissing at me in the press when I pushed the books back in,’ I told Donal, relieved and yet confused as to what had happened.

And even though we could still see Sidney, as calm grew there *was* a hissing noise.

‘Have a look,’ I urged Donal. ‘I’ll go and get Molly.’

By the time I got back with Molly in my arms, sobs now reduced to a sleepy snuffle, Donal was laughing, a can of air freshener in his hand which I vaguely remembered from three or four years back when we were trying to sell our old house and get rid of the dog smell. It seemed that the can had been lying in the press with the lid off and when I had pushed the books in, the spray nozzle had jammed and hence the hissing noise.

My laughter was as much nervous relief as general amusement over the whole situation. I have to admit that I’ve never been too fond of aerosols since.

A few hours later, I got out my phone book and started ringing the four or five contacts I had who had an interest in reptiles, eager to pass on Sidney before the serious work had to be done. Reptile fanciers in general tend to be passionate about their hobby, so I was quite sure that one of them would be happy to take him on in his current condition. And most of them were far more knowledgeable than I would ever be in relation to the creatures. But luck was not on my side. I was on my last hope, but Dieter, a German living in North Dublin, although keen, was going

away for a week that very morning. If I could keep Sidney until his return ...? I had no choice. Seven long days before I could hand him over – if he lasted that long.

Clearly, the previous night's exertions had taken their toll on Sidney. That morning he appeared quite lifeless, coiled neatly around a log I had left for him in the vivarium. I checked both the temperature and humidity and satisfied myself that both were suitable and started reading up my reptile book.

Apart from his obvious ill-health, the only other clinical signs were the telltale bubbles that appeared over his nostril at regular intervals. This was indicative of some form of respiratory infection, but whether this was secondary to his ill health or the initiating factor, I didn't know.

What he needed was a daily injection of antibiotics, regular bathing in tepid water and worst of all, stomach tubing, to force some essential nutrients into the reluctant feeder. All of this I had done before, but usually at a clinic where the owner was able to hold the snake while I performed the tasks with carefully gloved hands.

Molly was clearly enthralled with the newcomer when she saw him first.

'Nicey snakey,' she cooed at him. 'Monny hold him?' she questioned, inquisitive eyes looking up at me.

'No, no! Don't touch!' I replied, a little too abruptly. 'He's too sick,' I added. 'But he is a very nice snake,' I assured her, not wanting to pass on my phobia.

In order to calculate the correct dose of the medications, Sidney had to be weighed. Although I could quite accurately estimate the weight of a cat or a dog by picking them up, I

had not handled enough snakes to even begin to estimate his weight. I had to get him back into his pillowcase – last night, it had seemed relatively easy to tip him out of the pillowcase into the carefully prepared vivarium, but now, how I wished I had left him where he was. Pulling on my gloves, I braced myself, reached down and cautiously touched the smooth body. The warmth always took me by surprise. The problem was that his head was tucked down in the middle of the coil so I couldn't get hold of it. Trying to make things easier, I decided that maybe I would be able to slip the pillowcase under him and scoop him into it without any major handling. Slowly, gradually, I eased the frayed edge in under the coil, but when I was almost half way there, the head suddenly shot up as though he was only now realising the unwelcome intrusion. I dropped the pillowcase and jumped up, almost knocking Molly over as she stood close by, delighted with the morning's entertainment.

Obviously weakened by his prolonged illness, Sidney's head drooped again. Taking a deep breath and quelling the waves of nausea that were threatening to overcome me, I managed to grasp him just behind the head – firmly, but gently enough not to damage the delicate bones in the area. I shuddered as he squirmed in my hands, but kept my hold, more afraid now of letting him go. With one eye firmly fixed on him, I reached over for the pillowcase and gradually drew him up high enough to drop his tail end into it. Once his bulk was safely contained, I let go of his head, withdrew my hand and held my breath for a few moments until all was still. Keeping a firm hold on the top,

I sat him up on the weighing scales and at last, the first task was completed.

Dropping pillowcase and all back into the vivarium, I was able to calculate and draw up the correct dose of antibiotic in the tiny insulin syringe. I contemplated injecting him through the bag but figured it would be better to know where the head was. I rolled back the edges until he was sitting on top of it, and, grasping the head, edged the needle in under the skin between two scales. With almost a sense of sympathy, I noticed how thin and gaunt he was, but was relieved that in his weakened state he didn't even seem to notice my ministrations.

The next task was the bath. With Sidney safely contained in his pillowcase, I went in search of a suitable container. Search as I did, though, I failed to come up with anything suitable for a four-and-a-half-foot constrictor to have a bath in. There was nothing for it – our own bath it would have to be.

Molly clapped her hands when she saw me running a mix of hot and cold water into the bath and immediately started pulling off her fleecy jumper.

'Monny bath! Monny bath!' she cried, in obvious glee at the unexpected morning treat.

'No, Molly. The bath is for the snake.'

She looked at me incredulously and I couldn't but agree with her – maybe I was losing it.

With ten centimetres of tepid water gently swirling around the bath, I slowly lowered the snake. It wasn't until he sank down to the bottom that I began to wonder if he would know to hold his head up over the water level or not.

I counted to five as he lay motionless below the surface, thin trails of bubbles blowing out of his nostrils. There was nothing for it but reach down and grasp the head.

So there I knelt, crouching over the bath, firmly holding Sidney's head at arm's length and watching, with a mix of horror and fascination, as the long body gradually relaxed and uncoiled and lazily flicked from side to side, creating little whirlpools in the water.

Of course, the phone had to ring.

Desperately trying to get my mobile out of my right pocket with my left hand while keeping my eyes fixed on Sidney, I finally managed to hold it up to my ear. It was the bank manager. If I was free, he asked, could I take a few minutes to discuss my account with him? Glad of the excuse, I casually informed him that I was actually tied up at the moment – bathing a snake.

Sounding slightly incredulous, he began to enquire as to why I was bathing a snake. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Molly, who had been strangely quiet up to now, heaving a large bottle of bubble bath up onto the edge of the bath.

'Snakey like bubbles. Pink bubbles!' she declared as she started to tip the contents into the bath water.

'No, Molly!' I shouted and I reached out to grab it from her while still holding onto Sidney. I watched in horror as the phone slipped out of my hands, skidded along the edge of the bath tub and with a resounding plop, fell into the water.

I didn't even begin to wonder what the bank manager would think – but at least he couldn't ring me back, I

thought wistfully, as I watched my phone glide carelessly up and down along the base of the bath from the current created by Sidney's body.

'Okay. That will have to do you,' I told Sydney after what seemed a lot longer than fifteen minutes.

All that was left to do now was to stomach tube him with the mix of concentrate feed and supplements, specifically designed for ailing reptiles. I was well familiar with the scenario of having the snake restrained by the owner, with the first half metre or so, depending on the size, dangling down vertically, to allow me to slip the carefully measured tube over the back of the mouth and down into the stomach. Today, with no loving owner to console him, Sidney was in no mood to cooperate. Clearly in a huff at being hauled out of the warm bath, he was now coiled tightly in a roll with only the head that I was still holding, sticking out.

Obstinately, he refused to open his mouth, which I gently probed with the well lubricated tip of a stomach tube.

There was nothing for it but to lower him back into the bath to see if he would uncoil. It took three or four more attempts before I finally managed to get him to open his mouth so I could pass the tube in. He hung down, the bottom few feet still in the bath water. With the stomach tube in place, he hung sullenly, obviously reluctant to coil with the rubber tube in him. With one hand, I managed to attach the sixty millilitre syringe onto the top of the tube and gently squirt in the mushy, grey-brown liquid.

I watched the last of it disappear down the tube with the

aid of gravity, but before it had all gone down, Sidney decided to rebel. Flicking his tail up again, with the skill of a well practised contortionist, he began to coil. Dropping the syringe, I was forced to grab him mid-trunk and resist against the surprisingly powerful movements to keep him in a straight line, until all the fluid had trickled in. I tried to ignore the muscular rippling under my hands until I was satisfied that the tube was empty and I could safely remove it.

‘Right. That’s it. You’re done!’ I said, thankful at last to be able to release the head and drop him back into the vivarium before firmly replacing the lid.

The next week seemed to rotate around injections, baths and tube-feeding as it took a few hours each day to muster up the courage to approach my patient. By day three, the bubbles had stopped blowing out his nostril and when I reweighed him on day five, despite myself, I was pleased to see that he had put on some weight. By the end of the week, the previously dull skin was starting to shed and the thin backbone was not quite so visible. I felt confident that Sidney was beginning on the long road to recovery – I just didn’t know how long it would take. My main problem now was that as Sidney recovered his strength, he became livelier and more aware of my limitations as a snake handler. While he loved his bath and tolerated his injections, I could no longer tube him on my own. As soon as he would see the tube coming, he would coil himself firmly into a knot, knowing full well that I wouldn’t have the ability to force him out of it. By the sixth day, I offered Donal the option of holding his trunk or passing the

stomach tube. Thankfully, he chose the former as I was much more confident at giving out directions than following them.

On the following Thursday morning, after Sidney had survived my tender, if not so loving care for a full week, the phone rang.

I was never more relieved to hear Dieter's German accent booming down the line. He was aware of my reluctance with his beloved species, and he could never quite comprehend it.

'But surely, you will want to keep him now you have made him better?' he questioned.

'Oh no, he's all yours,' I assured him quickly. 'How soon do you think you can get here?'

So keen was Dieter to see his new charge that he insisted on making a detour from Dublin airport via Wicklow. By the time he arrived, I had all the medications and instructions packed. The only thing that remained was Sidney himself, who seemed to be a little feisty this morning. Graciously, I allowed Dieter the honour of loading his new addition.

'Doesn't look too bad now, does he?' admired Dieter, as Sidney looped himself in slow, gracious movements up his arms and around his neck in a casual manner that he had never displayed with me.

Despite the mutual love-hate relationship that I had built up with Sidney, I was very relieved to see him being loaded into the back of the Ford Fiesta. As soon as the crunching of gravel stopped, I packed up all the containers, stomach tubes, heat pads and the whole array of

accessories that he had used and soaked them in a strong disinfectant solution in the bath. That evening, having drained and dried all the accessories, I disinfected the bath, scrubbing it as it had never been scrubbed before. To this day, I still, personally, prefer to use the shower!

I was a bit surprised not to hear from Dieter over the next few days, but no news was most definitely good news in this case.

A few weeks later, just when the nightmares were beginning to fade and I was almost feeling brave enough to sleep with my feet sticking out from under the duvet, an A4 envelope arrived, lined on one side with stiff cardboard. Eagerly I ripped it open and to my horror, out fell a photograph of Sidney in mid-strike, jaws opened one hundred and eighty degrees wide around the scrawny body of a day-old chick. In horror, I dropped it, the quality of the photograph being so good that I could almost smell him again. The sheet enclosed read:

To Gillian.

As you can see the snake is now back to full health and eating well. Thanks again,

Dieter.

PS 'Sidney' is a female— have decided to call her Beauty.