

The Farmer in the Dell

DAVE BRYANT

Author's note: As far as possible, correct (if perhaps surprising) terms are used for equine body parts.

The farmer in the dell

The farmer in the dell

Hi-ho the derry-o

The farmer in the dell

DALE WAS A SIMPLE PONY of the land. Family tradition had it that his ancestors were among the first to follow in Puddinghead's and Smart Cookie's hoofsteps to the bountiful new land of Equestria — but they also were among the first to stop. They claimed and settled a verdant little dale nestled among foothills guarding the flanks of an ancient, weathered mountain range, on which faraway Canterlot itself eventually perched. There the family stayed, a thousand years and more, through Discord's reign of terror, the advent of the royal sisters, Nightmare Moon's rise and fall, and Luna's long absence.

Even in these modern times, with newfangled steam locomotives and telegraphy making so much less of

distances that once isolated towns and villages a day's walk apart, the old farmstead was out of the way. To be sure, a potbellied stove now heated the small farmhouse in place of the old flagstone fireplace, and a coal-fired iron cookstove sat in front of the brick oven that backed the same fireplace, but no gas line yet ran out to the modest home from the nearest town of Cloverford, miles off and a few hundred strides lower.

The one big change wrought by those industrial-age inventions was to draw away the next generation to the glamor and excitement of the big city. It looked as if poor Dale was destined to be the last of his line to work the fields cradled in the small valley.

The farmer takes a wife
The farmer takes a wife
Hi-ho the derry-o
The farmer takes a wife

The graying but still hale stallion was busy this fine spring. Few hired hooves wanted to hike up to the dell, rather than trot half the distance yet make at least as many bits. He was left to handle nearly all the chores himself, and he'd been forced to invest in a spanking new self-guiding plow, another innovation from the burgeoning cornucopia of steam-and-steel technology. Alas, it didn't deliver on the promise of its name so well as he might wish, but it was better than nothing, for he

had no partner to steer.

Time was, his wife would have worn the hind traces to keep their old iron plow going straight and true, but she'd been gone a long while now, lost after the birth of their younger foal. If one of those fancy new hospitals had been nearby things might have turned out differently, but the midwife claimed not. Even after so many years he still wondered, and every night he made sure the framed tintype portrait of her smiling face and firm, athletic figure was clean and bright, no matter how tired he was at the end of the day's work.

The plow stood at the center of the barn — little bigger than a glorified shed — resting on blocks above the straw-strewn floorboards; thick, sturdy leather-and-sailcloth traces stretched from the three-point hitch to hooks on the back wall, as did the steerboard that allowed the puller to navigate as well as haul. Light from Celestia's sun filtered between the planks of the walls and fell through the open doorway, dusty and fragrant thanks to the blossoming flora and rich soil, to illuminate the cool dim interior. Dale stepped absently around the mechanism, inspecting it closely after its first uses of the ongoing planting season, occasionally applying lubricating oil from the scissor-pump oiler clamped in his teeth, jaws squeezing the pump-grip.

The latest issue of the Cloverford weekly newspaper had carried a front-page announcement of the big wedding set to happen this very day up at the royal

capital, but while other folk might take a holiday to celebrate, he had no time for it. He wondered idly about the event, sure it would be incomparably grander than the long-ago justice-of-the-peace ceremony that still rated among the three most important moments of his life, and hummed to himself a country tune centuries old. Other than his low humming and the syncopated thumps of his hooves on the wood floor, only the drowsy buzz of honeybees and other insects and the rustle of breeze-blown foliage filled the air.

The wife takes a child

The wife takes a child

Hi-ho the derry-o

The wife takes a child

A thunderous *boom* abruptly rocked the barn, all the more shocking for the quiet that preceded it. Through the ringing in his ears, Dale could hear raucous canine barks and outraged feline complaints. A half-grown shepherd dog romped into the outbuilding to tell his master all about the disturbance with excited yaps and wriggles; the brindled barn cat streaked across the floor and made for the rafters.

“All right, all right!” he yelled, only partly because of his temporary partial deafness. “Let’s go see what that was about.” He put down the oiler, wiped off his muzzle and forehooves with a cloth, and ambled

through the doorway out of the barn.

With narrowed eyes he looked around as he moved farther from the barn, along the packed-earth track that connected it with the nearby farmhouse. Nothing seemed to be amiss, other than some fast-moving dark shapes high in the air. They didn't look like any birds he'd ever seen, nor did they resemble pegasus ponies . . . exactly. He wasn't sure just what they were, to tell the truth.

He dismissed the rapidly disappearing airborne oddities in favor of the original reason for his investigation. It was a minute or two before he spotted, of all things, a long *crater* in his nearest field, a thin veil of smoke rising from it. He scowled unhappily; the whole crop would be lost if the damage was as bad as it could be.

It took a little effort for the aging stallion to work his way up the lip of loose, crumbling dirt that formed the crater wall. His glare vanished into a gape of surprise when he looked down, into the far end of the shallow furrow, at the source of the smoke.

A black, vaguely equine shape sprawled limp as a rag doll. Tattered translucent wings stuck out at random angles from its back, and honest-to-Celestia *holes* drove completely through all four of its limbs. Mane, tail, and ears were short and uneven. Its warped and twisted horn was longer and thicker than any alicorn he'd seen on the local unicorn population down in Cloverford; as he watched, the last faint vestige of a green

magic glow guttered out. And it had fangs.

The shepherd did not like it one little bit, and raced ahead to dance around it, barking ferociously. "Knock it off," Dale called out, at the same time raising an arm to wave the dog away. As the cringing canine complied, he scrambled down the curved inner slope to stand beside the inert figure.

"Welp," he said aloud, in the manner of those who long have been their own and only company. "Guess I'd better get you inside and take a look at your hurts."

The child takes a nurse

The child takes a nurse

Hi-ho the derry-o

The child takes a nurse

The task was easier said than done, but a lifetime of hard and dangerous farmwork made it seem trivial by comparison. Most difficult was getting a hastily-assembled travois under the body without aggravating possible injuries, especially to the neck—and without assistance. Never once did Dale stop to wonder why he was doing it; where populations are widely scattered, mutual aid can be a matter of life or death. It was of no account that he'd never seen the stranger's like before. That stranger needed help.

After considering the problem briefly, he settled on nudging the travois into place, then digging carefully

around the body by degrees. More than once he had to shoo away the overly helpful dog, who thought digging was the most wonderful idea in the world, from literally undermining his efforts. It took longer than he liked, but at last he had his patient safely aboard the platform.

“Don’t like it that you’re not awake yet,” he muttered more to himself than to the still-unconscious creature as he dragged the travois into the house. He let down his burden in the middle of the main room, but left it, travois and all, just where it lay.

The examination that followed was hardly up to the standards of the unicorn physicians and earth-pony nurses at Clover General Hospital, but its rough practicality and faint whispers of earth magic sufficed to assure Dale that his patient suffered no broken bones, at least. The holes in arms and legs certainly didn’t seem to be wounds, for their interiors were covered with the same satin-shiny chitinous surface as the rest of the body. He noted in passing that no mark showed on the upturned haunch, so this wasn’t any sort of pony, even if there was some resemblance.

The dog sniffed doubtfully at the whatever-it-was, but at least he’d stopped barking, bored that no response to the noise was forthcoming. “I’ll be switched if I know what this is all about,” Dale confessed to the pup, who panted and wagged his tail in answer. “I guess the only thing to do is to let . . . it, I s’pose . . . sleep itself out.

Meanwhile, I've got to get back to work." And so he did. The plow was done, pretty much, but there was that big nasty hole in one of his fields, and he needed to save what he could.

The nurse takes a dog

The nurse takes a dog

Hi-ho the derry-o

The nurse takes a dog

The sky echoed Celestia's flowing mane and the sun sat on the horizon by the time Dale wearily trudged back up toward his home. He hoped he wouldn't need to drag the travois down to Cloverford, but if the stranger didn't show any sign of improvement, he'd have to do just that.

He looked up just in time to see a faint flash of green through a window, visible only because of the gathering dusk. With a frown he picked up the pace a little, and pushed open the door just moments later. "H'lo? I expect you're a mite confused, waking up in . . ."

The breath went out of him in a rush and he sat down on the doorstep abruptly, unable to get out another word. In front of him, facing the tintype that held pride of place, stood a pony—and not just any pony. The spitting image of his long-gone wife whirled to stare back at him; only the warm-gray eyes, coat, mane, and tail were different, for the monochrome

photograph gave no hint of her lovely, vibrant colors.

Dale's mouth worked, but only a wheezy rasp escaped, as did a single fat tear, tracking slowly down his cheek.

The *doppelgänger* trembled and a faint green haze suffused the stallion, then drifted lazily toward her — it. Dale fell in a clatter of hooves, dead to the world before he hit the floor.

The dog takes a cat

The dog takes a cat

Hi-ho the derry-o

The dog takes a cat

An alien black face, hardly visible in the unlit gloom, blinked down at him with lambent green eyes blank of iris or pupil. Glittering fangs in a closed mouth were the only other visible detail; the rest was silhouette.

Dale jerked back in startlement. "Buh!" he exclaimed eloquently, then winced at the thump on the noggin the floor had just given him. Slowly he gathered himself to stand; the other stepped back to give him room. "Oh, sweet Celestia, I ache all over," he groaned unnecessarily as he swayed to his hooves.

Finally, once he was certain he was all in one piece, he peered over at the . . . creature. "Was that you?" he asked hoarsely. "You know, before?" He waved an arm vaguely toward the portrait.

A slow half-glimpsed nod answered, but no expression or words accompanied it.

"You're a quiet one," the stallion observed as he plodded toward the nearest lantern. "Anyway . . . I hope you're feelin' better'n I am, 'cause I don't think I could get you to the hospital, the shape I'm in."

The stranger clopped around to stand in front of him as he lit the wick, bringing a bubble of cheery light to the room. Another nod assured him there was no need for an ambulance run.

"Well, that's good. I guess it's supper time, then." Dale moved toward the tiny kitchen, but a touch on his side stopped him. He turned back to see the same bubble-cheese hoof gesture toward the tintype.

"That . . . that's my wife," the widower answered. He cleared his throat before continuing, "She's been gone near a score o' years now, but I miss her just as much as if it were a day."

"I know." The words were distorted, as if there was a buzzing insect voice behind the more pony-like tones, and there was no clue whether that pony would be stallion or mare.

Dale jerked in surprise, but replied, "Yeah, I guess it ain't hard to tell."

"No. Your love is . . . very strong. It . . . was a feast to me."

The stallion's bewilderment was plain in his voice. "What? I don't understand."

“Changelings live on it. But there is a cost. It draws out the love and the life.” The admission was reluctant, and the green eyes disappeared as the head turned away.

“Are you sayin’ that’s why I feel so sore?”

Another nod, still facing the picture, was the only answer.

“That’s hard lines.”

The head whipped back. “You should be angry.”

“Mebbe I am, a little. But I guess you can’t help it, can you? Griffins eat meat, but that’s the way they’re put t’gether. It don’t make ’em bad, just different.”

It was the changeling’s turn to slump and sit down as if deflated. “You don’t . . . hate me?”

“Why should I? I reckon you’re dangerous, same as a griffin, so I should be wary, but it’s no call for hate.”

“You don’t hate me.” A note of wonder filled the repetition.

“Nope. I don’t want to be eaten down to skin and bone, and I’ll thank you not to do that, but I don’t hate you. Now, if I’m not going to be skin and bone anyway, I need some food. Do you eat anything besides love?”

The cat takes a rat

The cat takes a rat

Hi-ho the derry-o

The cat takes a rat

Coaxing out the changeling's story took effort, but Dale's patient questions and unflappable acceptance had their effect as he prepared a simple meal for them both. "And that was the end o' that," he commented thoughtfully at the close of the tale. "Sounds to me like that queen got her comeuppance, not least for leading the lot o' you on a fool's errand."

"What . . . what do you mean?" The question sounded a bit dazed.

"Even if it all worked in Canterlot, sooner or later the word would get out. The moment it did there would've been an epic pony war. Do you know how many ponies there are in Equestria? I'm not sure o' the number, but I know it's a big one. Every pony that died wouldn't be around to feed you. Every changeling that died would make it harder to take over. Equestria would be ruint, you changelings would be ruint, and all for naught in the end."

There was silence for a spell in the wake of that stark verdict.

"I never thought of that," came the quiet admission. "I don't think any of us did. We just followed our queen, as you would follow your princesses. And we were desperate."

"A starving country will do that," Dale agreed. "We came to Equestria because we were starving and desperate." He gave the changeling a meaningful look. "We were starving and desperate because we hated

each other.”

The changeling looked down at the half-empty plate before it rather than meet his eyes.

“Come on. Let me show you something. Can you read?”

The rat takes the cheese

The rat takes the cheese

Hi-ho the derry-o

The rat takes the cheese

The library was small but carefully chosen, and still included all the acquisitions accumulated as the family grew and matured. The two of them sat side by side on the overstuffed sofa as Dale read aloud from the cheerfully-illustrated foals’ picture-book about Hearth’s-Warming. The changeling listened raptly and examined the whimsical but painstaking engravings of Princess Platinum, General Hurricane, and Chancellor Puddinghead, along with their companions Clover, Pansy, and Smart Cookie. When it was over, Dale closed the book gently and tapped it with a hoof.

“O’ course, the real story was a lot more complicated than that, but those’re the bare bones ’f it. As foals get older, their heads are ready for more details that don’t make for such happy reading. You and I both know what some of those details have to be.”

A silent nod acknowledged the point, though the

changeling still looked down at the book rather than at him.

“Now, I’m not doubtin’ you when you say your folk were desperate. A pony’s stomach gets to growlin’ enough, and there’s not much he won’t do to fix it. I’m thinkin’ changelings ain’t no different. But I’ve gotta ask: If you all were starvin’ that badly, why are you still alive?”

“What?” The changeling looked up at him with a puzzled expression. Dale wasn’t sure how he could tell that, but he didn’t doubt that he could.

“From what you said, Her Majesty had it in her head to take over Equestria for all the love that’s in it. Okay, that makes a cockeyed sense. But it would’ve taken a long time, if it worked at all, and it already had to take weeks or months for her to take the place o’ Her Highness and get everything all set. All o’ you should’ve starved to death in the mean time.”

The changeling’s ears laid back, but there was no other answer.

“You et that supper right fine, and with those fangs o’ yours, I bet you eat meat along with pony fare. Sounds like you can’t grow much in the land where you were livin’, which is a right shame. So there it is—no food, no love, no nothin’ for years at a time.”

“We hunted and raided where we could. We stripped the land bare. It kept us alive, but we never knew plenty.”

“Now, see, there’s your problem.” The stallion raised a forehoof and gestured emphatically. “Equestria knows plenty *because* we know love. Love for each other, love for the land and the plants that grow in it, love for the sun and moon and clouds in the sky, love for all the creatures that walk and swim and fly — even the ones that hunt and prey.”

“As you know love.” The voice caught, its buzzing undertones gentler, quieter. “Love for your wife . . . and your foals and your farm. It burns in you, and I can feel it.”

“Yeah. All o’ that.” Dale swallowed and looked up at the tintype across the room and at the pair of smaller framed photographic plates standing on the hearth, colt and filly, now grown and flown to distant Manhattan. “If you treat it with care and respect, you can live a long time on the same land.” His voice was soft and dreamy. “Sires and dams, fillies and colts have lived here more’n a thousand years, and we ain’t used up the land yet. That’s what love does.”

The silence that followed was longer, broken only by the changeling’s fast, shallow breathing. It rocked back and forth on the couch, its arms wrapped around its barrel and its wings fluttering erratically. Finally, in a breathy, frightened tone, it spoke.

“Teach me how.”

The cheese stands alone
The cheese stands alone
Hi-ho the derry-o
The cheese stands alone

When Dale appeared in the autumn, shortly after the Running of the Leaves, at the county seat down in Cloverford, he brought with him a sturdy earth mare no pony could recollect seeing before. Her appearance was striking, not so much for her beauty (truth to tell, she was more than a little plain) as for her remarkably consistent coloring—a uniform weathered bronze from nose to tail-tip. Even the mark on her haunch, a simple heart-shape with a single tear-like drop falling from its point, was the same color, but a darker hue that seemed almost black.

His few friends congratulated him on finding a new sweetheart, relieved that he seemed at last to have put away his mourning for his first wife; if any of them noticed a resemblance in the lines of her face and body, none mentioned it. She was shy, allowing Dale to do all the talking—a far cry from the vivacious and outspoken mare they remembered—but her devotion to the stallion who sought a marriage license for the pair of them was plain.

Other ponies questioned his finding a new sweetheart at his age, especially in view of her obvious youth. “Ah, well, it’s all a matter o’ stayin’ young at heart,” he

observed. "And she'll help keep me young, she will." The mare in question looked at him sidelong with a winsome smile and swung her tail to smack his haunch in the time-honored manner of a mare whose stallion has embarrassed and pleased her all at once. The naysayers' resistance melted.

With perfect truth he explained that he'd found her collapsed on his land and took her in to nurse her back to health. After that, well, one thing led to another, and here they were. To the coarse rejoinders that followed he stated firmly that they were doing it in the proper order, and there would be time enough after seeing the justice of the peace for all the things married folk do.

And so there was. In the fullness of time, a foal was born—a black-coated unicorn with an oddly-shaped alicorn button and bright green eyes. The farm might have another chance, if the little colt's parents could instill in his heart a love for the land and for his fellow ponies.

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