

The Farmer and the Cobbler

Once upon a time in a land far, far away there lived a farmer.

He had been a farmer in that land for a very long time, as had his father before him, and *his* father before him.

In fact, the farmer's family had been farmers for so long no one had ever thought they had been, or could be, anything else.

The farmer's most precious possession was not his horse, nor his cow, nor even the farmhouse in which he lived.

These were truly valuable, but the farmer's family had been farming for many too many years to count, so there had been many horses and cows. Even the farmhouse had been re-built and a new cellar dug in his grandfather's time.

The farmer's most precious possession was none of these things. Instead, it was something he kept close to him, safely hidden in a secret hiding hole, behind the third panel along, in the wall of his bedroom.

This was where he kept the Family Farm Book.

The Family Farm Book held the wisdom and advice of the farmer's father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather, and many 'greats' before that.

It was ancient.

It had a leather cover, parched with time, brittle to touch and badly faded.

It was so old, parts of the book were in a language he could no longer read. Some of its pages were missing. Some had been nibbled at by silverfish. Others had become so badly browned with age that you could barely make out the letters on the pages.

It was an old book indeed.

And that's the very thing that made the Family Farm Book so precious. It enclosed everything the farmer knew about farming, and probably all he'd ever need to know. In the Family Farm Book the farmer could recognise the hand of his father and grand-father, who both had died long ago. It connected him to them, and them to him.

It was not just 'a book'. It was fabled memory, family history and farming almanac, all in one.

As it happened, the farmer lived in a valley as isolated as it was beautiful. He could not imagine anywhere else on earth that could be as lovely, or as productive. His valley provided nearly everything he needed, so he rarely had to venture outside of it, meet other farmers who lived in other valleys in far flung parts of the country, or go to the main market place in the city.

But all was not well.

The good king, who had ruled over the country for as long as anyone could remember, died; as all kings eventually must. The new king was not good and kind and just and fair. He was evil and cruel and corrupt and very unfair. So unfair, in fact, that he decided all the farms in all the country now belonged to him.

The king's rule was stern. He had soldiers and cavalry, and he demanded that all the farmers give their farms to him or they would have to leave the country.

As you can see, it was not much of a choice.

If you gave the king your farm, you'd have to leave the country because you'd have no farm. Or, if you didn't give the king your farm, you'd have to leave the country because the king would make you leave and he'd get your farm anyway.



So, sadly, the farmer left his valley to travel many, many weeks over the great ocean to find a new country where he could find a new farm and become a farmer once again.

Eventually, he found a spot, in a valley a little bit like the one he had left. It had been a long and exhausting journey.

He was now a very long way from home.

He barely recognised the landscape in which his new valley sat, so different was it from the land he'd left. And the people who lived there spoke a strange language. And the sun and the rain came at different times. And even the moon and stars were different: some were upside down, some he'd never seen before, and some from his old land he never saw again.

Nothing was as it had once been.

He could not bring his horse, or his cow, and certainly not his farmhouse. But he did bring the Family Farm Book.

He opened it with thankfulness for the wisdom and advice of his father, and his father before him, and *his* father before him; and all the others who had left their marks on the fragile pages.

Because some of the pages had been hard to read, the farmer's father had traced over their words with bold ink. The farmer could still make out some of the other writing, and he often wondered what might have been on the missing pages, but the bold ink pages had served him well until now, so that's what he read and re-read. They had always given him everything he needed to know.

At first everything went well. His farm prospered. His flocks multiplied. His harvests were plentiful. The king of this land was like the good king of the land he'd left. He was at peace, and could farm to his heart's content.

Only (very occasionally) did he have to leave his new valley to enter main market place of the big city. He didn't like going there.

It was noisy, his valley was quite.

It was hard to find his way around, his valley was like the palm of his hand.

And it was full of strangers, with strange ideas, selling strange produce with strange smells.

Now, as everyone knows, the stranger and the strange idea are two of the three most fascinating and fearful things in the whole world.

(You might think that something is *either* fascinating or fearful, but in reality every strange thing is both. It is sometimes fascinating because it's fearful. And sometimes we get fearful if something is *too* fascinating.)

By this stage the farmer had become so used to the Family Farm Book and to his valley, and his heart had been so wounded by the evil, corrupt and unfair king, that the farmer thought anything fascinating was fearful.

So, despite his curiosity from time to time, he let the market place—and all the strange people and ideas it bustled with—alone as much as he could.

At this point you might think that another evil king might enter the story. Or that some other wicked thing might trouble the farmer. Or that he'd meet some terrible fate.

But that's not what happened at all.

In fact, the opposite.

The good king was so good, so generous, and so open-hearted that many more farmers came to his kingdom.

They (the farmer thought) probably had their own Family Farm Books (though he wasn't sure about that). But he had his, and that's all that mattered.

More and more farmers moved into the kingdom. Before long, the farmer's farm was surrounded by other farms.

Some of them were much bigger than his. Some grew different crops. Others grew crops like his, except much better. Some had many horses and cows.

Some of the new farmers wanted to visit his farm, but by this time the farmer was more fearful than fascinated, so he kept to himself as much as he could. He sold his produce in the market place, but never let the other farmers get too close to him, or he to them.

Despite the increasing number of farms, and the decreasing success of his, the farmer comforted himself. He had what they didn't. He had *the* Family Farm Book. If others did have Family Farm Books none could be as old, as complete, or as helpful as his.

But, curiously, in the new land, with different weather patterns and the wind blowing from a different direction, and a hotter and brighter sun, even some of the bold-letter pages of his Family Farm Book started fading.

The farmer traced over them in indelible ink to keep what he could, but it seemed that even more of the pages were missing and even more of remaining ones had been attacked by silverfish and cockroaches.

The farmer became even more fearful.

What if he should lose the Family Farm Book entirely?

It became even more precious to him.

He kept it under lock and key, in a new hiding hole, and kept the key under his pillow.

Despite trying everything written on the pages he could read, the farmer's farm started to fail. His crops were blighted. His harvests were poor. His despair grew.

And, to make it worse, because he grew less and less on his own farm, he had to go into the market place in the big city more and more.

Yet, he consoled himself that eventually the Family Farm Book would prove right and things would be just as they once were. Or better. It was only a matter of time.

One day, in the afternoon, just after lunch and while the farmer was having his cup of tea, a friendly looking stranger came to his door.

The farmer was immediately on the alert.

Might he be after the Family Farm Book? Had he heard about it? Could he keep it safe?

But, to his surprise, the friendly looking stranger wasn't a local farmer at all. He was a travelling cobbler. And by the look of him he'd travelled a lot, through all sorts of weather.

He had come to the farm, he said, because an Old Woman whom he had met on the road many miles ago had directed him there.

She had said that he should go to the farm and offer to repair the farmer's work boots. She had explained that she knew the farmer very well. She had seen how hard the farmer had worked over so many summers; how much he loved and valued the work of his father, and *his* father, and *his* father before him; and how hard were the times he'd fallen into.

But she also knew that the farmer's work boots—his only boots—were worn through.

And sure if enough, it was so.

Despite the farmer polishing his boots as best he could to make them look nice, the holes in the soles allowed stones to poke into his feet, so he could not walk without pain. The decayed leather and laces meant he could not take steady paces, so unsure was his footing. There were holes where his big toes poked through, so he constantly kept stubbing them and bleeding through his sock.

The Old Woman had known all this, had explained it to the travelling cobbler. He knew. She knew. That's why he had come.

As the Old Woman had said to the cobbler,

'You and I both know there's nothing more important to a farmer than the boots on his feet; and nothing more beautiful in the whole world than the feet of a farmer'.

So, the cobbler had come.

But he was a stranger; and because of that the farmer was both fearful and fascinated. The fascinated part of the farmer let the stranger in, but the fearful part kept the cobbler only in the tack-room. He could work on his boots in there, the farmer thought. That's the best place for a cobbler to cobble.

Slowly and patiently the cobbler worked.

The afternoon wore on.

The farmer busied himself in the kitchen with accounts and pieces of paper and tally lists of jobs. He kept a wary eye on the cobbler, whose work seemed to be taking much longer than the farmer had hoped.

'I hope this is not going to cost too much', the farmer thought to himself.

'I don't have much, and I need the little I have to survive. Do I really need the boots repaired? Can't I make do? I have gotten by for so long! Perhaps it's just

a waste of time and money, when I could be buying feed for the horse, or lucerne for the cow.'

But then he thought of the stones, and the unsteady gait, and the stubbed toes; and he thought it might be money well spent. If he could afford it.

For the cobbler, it was not an easy job.

The farmer's boots not only had holes in the soles, but the stitching between the soles and the uppers was rotten, and while the farmer liked to keep the uppers looking as good as he could, there were deep scuff marks, cuts, and worn out patches. The laces were frayed and the eyelets rusty. The tongue of the left boot was swollen because it had absorbed too much water and had gone mouldy, while the tongue of the right boot was shiny from polish, but paper thin.

Once it had been, truly, a magnificent pair of boots.

That's how the farmer still imagined them. As they were.

Now, as he watched the cobbler turn the boots over in his hands; as he saw him clean out the holes, to make ready for repair; as he saw him cut around the rusty eyelets, unstick the rotten threads and poke his awl through the toe holes; he started to see the boots as they really were.

That made him sad.

He felt ashamed.

He had failed.

He felt foolish.

Then the farmer noticed something. He wasn't paying as much attention to his paperwork and ledgers and tally sheets. More and more he forgot about them as his fascination grew. He became not just interested, but enthralled as he watched the cobbler work. And especially as he saw the way the cobbler worked.

The farmer wondered to himself,

'Why does he lift his tack hammer in such an awkward way? Why does he use the awl at such a strange angle? Why does he hold the needle with such a difficult grip?'

Then, in the light of the setting sun - as the rays struck at just the right angle - the farmer could see that the cobbler had the most appalling scars on his hands and wrists. They had bent and deformed his hands, in some long ago event too horrible for the farmer even to imagine.

He couldn't rush anything, because he had to do everything with *those* hands!

Just before evening, as the farmer was lighting the first of the lamps in his kitchen (which didn't get the direct sun, where the cobbler was in the tack room), the cobbler came to the kitchen door.

He had almost finished.

Almost.

He had done a magnificent job, but he needed something else.

He had put down his tools, knocked on the door-post of the open door, and asked if he could speak with the farmer.

The farmer became fearful.

Would the stranger demand payment? Could he pay? Would he leave with job half done? Would he leave?

'Yes, sir', said the farmer (for some reason the cobbler had grown almost noble in the farmer's eyes, and the 'sir' was only natural), 'how may I help you?'

By this time the night had taken the light from the tack room window, so the farmer and the cobbler sat side by side at the kitchen table, in the light of the lamp the farmer had lit earlier.

The farmer pushed the paperwork aside, to make room for the cobbler and his tools. He found another lamp, two candles, and even an old mirror to set up behind them to direct the light onto their workspace.

'Come', said the cobbler, 'I will show you what I'm doing. You can help with this part.'

The farmer had never seen anyone hold a book with more respect or reverence. Despite his deformed hands, the cobbler handled the book gently, deftly, and with delicate strength.

'This', whispered the farmer, 'is my Family Farm Book'.

'I know', replied the stranger. 'I have seen many, and it is as fine as any I have seen. They have all been precious. They have all been loved. But in the end, they have all been put to another use.'

And with that, using the sharpest blade the farmer had ever seen, the cobbler sliced into the binding of the book, and with three deft moves had not only removed the leather cover from the book, but divided the leather from its backing.

Some silverfish scuttled out of the binding, into the darkness.

Having no cover, and no binding to hold them, the pages were now loose on the table.

And the miracle was that the farmer didn't mind! In fact, the opposite. Somehow he knew that this day was a special day indeed.

Then things became even stranger.

The leather - now a flat, parched, brittle-brown rectangle on the table before them - seemed impossibly unsuited to repair anything, let alone the farmer's boots.

'Perfect, just as it needs to be' smiled the cobbler.

And then, without a word of warning, he spat on the leather. Not once, but three times.

You may be thinking that this was deeply insulting to the farmer and a very disrespectful way to treat the Family Farm Book.

And for a moment, the farmer thought that too.

But with barely time to take a breath, the cobbler had placed the farmer's hands on top of his own and started to massage the spit into the leather.

The farmer could feel every tendon, muscle and fibre of the cobbler's malformed hands as he worked. He could feel the gentle strength, rubbing the moisture into the leather more deeply in one spot, less vigorously in another, but always moving. Always sensing just what pressure was needed. Always feeling the grain of the leather and immediately responsive to its condition.

The cobbler's hands moved back and forth, side to side; now in small circles, now tracing the edges of the cover; now resting to bring his warmth into one spot, now briskly massaging the moisture into the next.

The farmer's hands, still resting on top of the cobbler's, moved exactly with his. The cobbler was doing all the work, but the farmer experienced every sensation as though he were doing it.

Before long, and beyond anything the farmer had expected, the leather had been transformed into a supple, flexible, and deeply lustrous piece of the finest grained leather he had ever seen.

'Now this,' chuckled the cobbler, 'is something we can use!'

All night he worked, the farmer with him, next to him, watching him, and learning from him. And by morning there sat on the table the finest pair of boots the farmer had ever seen.

It was not the boots as they used to be; but far better than they had ever been. They were, without doubt, the farmer's old boots. But they were, without doubt, a new pair of boots entirely.

Then, the farmer did something *really* fascinating.

In excitement and joy, he gathered up the now loose pages of the Family Farm Book, rushed to the stable, mounted his old farm horse and rode as quickly as he could to the main market place in the big city.

The sun had come up as the farmer and the cobbler had completed the work at the kitchen table. By the time he arrived in the market place, many other farmers had also. They were busy setting out their stalls, displaying their produce, and preparing for the bustle of the day.

As he tied his horse to the rail, he noticed that others, too, wore boots a little like his. For some reason he had not seen that before.

A stranger approached him.

'Ho there! You have been here before, but we have never spoken. I hope you don't mind, but I couldn't help noticing your boots. Has the cobbler been with you?'

'Yes' the farmer stammered. 'Do you know him?'

'Yes! He visited our farm last month, and our neighbour's farm the month before that. If you look around, you'll see lots of us are wearing boots he worked on'.

And, sure enough, it was so.

The farmer's eyes scanned the busy scene. The cobbler's handiwork was everywhere. And not just in one style or one colour! It was clearly his work - if you'd ever seen a pair of boots that had passed through the cobbler's hands you'd have known them immediately - but no two pairs were the same.

'May I ask', said the farmer to the stranger, 'did he use any leather from your own house?'

'Yes, indeed! In fact, we had a very precious and ancient book, we called it the Book of Family Farming. No one else had a copy of that book or one like it. It was unique. He used the cover of that. And, when others have told me of the cobbler's visit, they have said the same. He always used something like that from their household.'

'He did the same with me', said the farmer. 'I expected to be overwhelmed with grief at its loss, but instead these boots have brought me such joy, I can barely contain it.'

'And that's not all', said the farmer's new friend, 'When we all brought the pages of our books out to show one another, we were amazed! Some of the pages of other people's books were clearly the missing pages from ours. Some of the words we couldn't read in our books, others could read in theirs. And some of the old language that we could no longer speak, others understood immediately!'

'Well, if that's the case' said the farmer, 'I have brought missing pages for someone else's book, and someone else has missing pages for me!'

And with that, the farmer and his new friend started comparing pages, and reading the pages from others' books, moving from stall to stall, sometimes laughing -

and at other times weeping - as they found missing pieces of one another's stories.

Throughout the market place the cobbler's new boots were carrying people from stall to stall and person to person. They ate together with joy and gladness of heart. They had become a new community.

In the meantime, the cobbler, who had left the farmer's farm by a different route, stood watching from a hill not far away, smiling.