

The Tale of Applebeck Farm

Prologue

Before the Beginning

Every story has a beginning. Ours opens on a bright August morning in 1910, in the Lake District of England. The sun, eager to be about his day's work, has already waded through the layer of cottony mist that blanketed Lake Windermere, clambered up the steep eastern slope of Claife Heights, and launched himself with a cheer into the clear blue sky above the Land Between the Lakes, a vantage point from which he can beam down upon the leaf-green and lake-blue earth.

But before every story there is . . . well, another story. For this is not the first time the sun has made his daily journey across the Land Between the Lakes. A great deal of time—a vast immensity of time, an unthinkable infinity of time, human and otherwise—has transpired before the beginning of our story. In fact, you might think that the sun is already quite tired of his day-in and day-out routine, for he has climbed Claife Heights more times than you or I could possibly count.

But if you asked the sun, I'm sure he would tell you that every day brings something interesting and intriguing, to observe. He has seen mountains rise beneath him, volcanoes erupt in his face, and seas ebb and flow. For a long time he watched icy glaciers advancing and retreating as they carved the ancient rock, scooping out convenient places for lakes and dropping enormous boulders here and there as if they were pebbles carelessly falling through a hole in a boy's pocket. All this ice made the earth shiver and even the sun felt a little chilly and remote and not terribly interested in what was going on below.

But then the weather warmed. The sun took off his overcoat and mittens, the ice thawed, and rivers and streams took over the job of pushing rocks here and moving mountains there, and generally rearranging the furniture. The lakes brimmed and green things made themselves at home, putting down roots and thrusting up leaves, mosses and lichens at first, then heather and bilberry and fern and willow and alder and finally oak and beech and yew and juniper and the lovely hawthorn. Animals set up housekeeping in the dales and fells, fish filled the lakes, birds took to the skies, and the sun was happy for the company.

And then the animals had to move over, because people had arrived. First came the clans who worked with stone, then iron and bronze. These people did not travel much farther than they could walk in a day, having pretty much everything they needed and wanted right in front of their noses. But then the Romans landed in the south of England. Since they had already traveled a considerable distance from Rome, you'd think they'd be ready to settle down. But they weren't, so they built a network of military roads and a massive wall of stone and turf straight across England, east to west, to separate the civilized from the barbarians (although the sun was hard-pressed to tell which was which).

But things didn't exactly turn out as they planned, and a few centuries later, the Romans packed up and journeyed back to Rome. The Celts carried on until they were joined by the Angles and the Saxons, and they continued carrying on as the Norsemen arrived and settled around the lakes, farming in the dales and pasturing sheep in the fells. The old Roman roads conveyed wayfarers from one market town to another, whilst the villages and farms were linked by cartways suited to oxen and carts, bridleways suited to horses, and narrower footways suited to

people. These were a great convenience, permitting people who lived in one valley to travel over the mountain to the next valley. Everyone went from cottage to market and church and field by the most direct and shortest route, and all got on quite famously.

But then people began buying and selling the land and constructing stone walls around the parts of it they owned, miniature versions of the Roman Wall. Hills were enclosed and divided, woodlands were fenced, fields hedged. The Age of Enclosure had arrived, and the land that was once used by many in common—picking fruit, pasturing livestock, gathering wood or bracken or peat or stone—became the private and exclusive property of a few. Over seven million acres of England's fields, forests, pastures, and uplands were turned over to private ownership and enclosed.

The sun was baffled by this, and failed to see how all those walls, fences, and hedges made life better for anyone, except possibly for the few rich people who owned the land. In fact, it looked to him as if all these barriers were a frightful nuisance, getting in the way of people and animals and requiring the bother of gates and stiles so people could continue to do their ordinary business, going along the byways they had used since longer than any could remember.

Time passed, as time has a way of doing. A young girl named Victoria became England's queen, and then grew to a very old and much loved lady. The kingdom prospered, and railways and roads were built to carry newly manufactured goods to seaports and cities. By this time, there were a great many more people in the Land Between the Lakes. They came afoot, on horseback, by carriage and coach and bicycle and even by motor car, an occasional brash *toot-toot!* frightening the birds into flight. A ferry made regular (more or less) trips across Lake Windermere and the railroad arrived at the edge of the district. It was kept by public opinion from going further than Windermere Station, so there it had to stop and turn around and go back to London, sulkily.

The railroad and ferry brought even more people, of course, so that the more-traveled lanes became turnpikes and the less-traveled lanes became roads, and some of the paths became lanes and others—well, they kept to being footpaths, for the convenience and pleasure of those who still, by choice or otherwise, went on foot. And because they had been footpaths for a very, very long time, everyone thought it was quite reasonable that they all should go on being footpaths, forever, no matter who might own the property over which they crossed.

But that did not happen.

And that is where our story begins, on an August morning in 1910, in the Lake District of England.