

THE ARK OF TASTE GOES TO SCHOOL

There are heroes
in our midst

THE STORY



CHAPTER 1

There are heroes in our midst

It was a sunny morning in Ark Valley, a fantastic place where streams gushed through meadows lush with flowers of a thousand shapes and colors. None of them were identical and the same was true of the fruits that grew in the trees. The woods echoed to the scampering of animals that were always in the mood to have fun and, if you listened carefully, you could hear the birds chirping in the trees as they chased each other from branch to branch.

It was a magical valley whose beauty lay in the variety of the species that lived in it, where men and women and grandparents and children lived happily, following the rhythms of life and the seasons.

After school, the children of the Valley used to run in the main meadow, but before they started playing they would sit under the tall oak tree by Mother Snail's house to shade themselves from the hot afternoon sun.

Mother Snail was the sage of the valley, a sprightly, talkative soul whose age was unknown to all. During those afternoons, the children played at seeing who was best at imitating the woodland creatures or inventing nursery rhymes, but what thrilled them most were stories and tales of heroes and heroines!

Mother Snail enjoyed taking part in their games and, curious to find out the secrets she kept, the children often asked her to tell them one of her many yarns. She would heave a long sigh and silence would fall among the children. Then she would start to speak in her calm, warm voice.

But that day it was Mario, a little boy with eyes the color of the sky, who caused silence to fall by asking the one question that none of them had dared ask before.

"Mother Snail, how old are you to know all these things?" he asked shyly.

"You little rascal, don't you know that you shouldn't ask the age of an old lady like me?" replied Mother Snail.

Mario blushed with embarrassment and tried to mumble an apology. Amid his friends' laughter, he asked another question.

"It's that you've lived here so long I was wondering ... In your day did school already exist?"

"Of course it did, what a question! And I really loved going!"

"I haven't loved it all that much recently! My schoolmates make fun of me because the teacher says I always have my head in the clouds."

"Tell me, where is that your head flies off to when you aren't listening to your teacher?"

"To the world of heroes!"

"Ah! You should be happy then, because when you hear the story I'm about to tell, your heroes won't seem so far away after all!"

"I'm going to tell you about when I was your age and no one listened to us Snails. You have to realize that in those days we used to be laughed at because we were so slow. When I was small, going to school was an adventure! I had to get up very early in the morning to get there in time because of my slow pace, and that's why my schoolmates used to poke fun at me. And when we used to go out to play in the meadow I, of course, was always the last to get there! Yet my leisurely pace allowed me to note things that the others, who were always in a hurry, didn't, so day by day I learned a lot.

"Even at the Great Assembly, where all the inhabitants used to meet to talk, no one used to listen to us! Mark you, by the time we got there everything had been decided anyway!"

"For a long time ill-advised decisions were taken. The strongest rode roughshod over the rest and imposed their personal interests over the general good. The trees were uprooted in the old orchards to make room for identical fields in which the same plant varieties were grown. 'You'll see, it'll all be much nicer,' they used to say. The new crops, which were all the same, drained the moisture out of the soil, which eventually dried up. 'No fear,' they said, 'we have a solution!' And they sprinkled this strange gray powder all over the Valley. 'It's to help the soil,' they said.

"But odd things began to happen. One day some trees fell ill, soon after the water in the river near the village grew scarce and what was left went all dark. We soon realized that something awful was happening to the whole valley."

"The days of the Great Grayness!" exclaimed Mario.

"That's right, Mario, it was an awful period for our people. Ark Valley lost all its colors, the animals ran away in fear, the land stopped bearing its fruits and people began to fear that they might have to leave their homes. We were invaded by this huge gray stain. During the Great Assembly of all the valley dwellers, there was often talk of a possible departure until one day the announcement was made: 'THE ARK COMMUNITY MUST ABANDON THE VALLEY.'

"It was during that period that I met Anita and Ettore, a sister and brother who were especially fond of our wood, where they used to play for hours and hours. The day I met them they had come to say goodbye to the oak tree and the main meadow for the last time. I was there and I heard Anita sobbing. 'Ettore, it's not fair. I don't want to leave. What's going to become of the Valley?'

"Don't be silly, Anita. The grown-ups have decided: we've got to leave, the Valley's disappearing.' That's when they noticed me. Anita was the first to greet me. "'Hi, Snail, what are you doing here? You've got a long journey ahead of you, you need to hurry up and leave.' I told her that we Snails were going to stay. 'We'll never leave this Valley, it belongs to us and we belong to it, we're going to try to resist to the end.' 'How brave of you!' said Ettore.

"All's already lost,' said Anita despondently.

"Nothing's lost as long as there's hope,' I encouraged her.

"What wise words, Snail. It's a pity grown-ups don't think like that. Maybe, growing up, we lose the ability to look at what surrounds us with curious eyes,' said Anita.

"Growing up, do we lose the ability to look at what surrounds us with curious eyes?" Hearing Anita's words I understood that together we could still do something. The thought didn't cross my mind alone. We looked at each other and at that moment the faces of the children lit up, and they asked me in unison, 'Do you know a way?'

Yes, I knew a way."



CHAPTER 2

The days of the Great Grayness

"We had to tackle the Great Grayness by restoring to our Mother Earth the elements that had allowed Ark Valley to be full of colors, shapes and diversity!"

"Tackling the Great Grayness meant venturing into the part of the Valley it had invaded. We had to enter the Black Forest, where no one dared to tread. All the poplar trees grew identically, planted close together at the same distance one from another. It was impossible to find one's bearings. No clump of grass as a marker, no tree with a bit of color. It was all gray."

"We walked in darkness for hours and we'd almost given up in despair, when we came across a small clearing in the dense woodland. At one time it must have been a spring where water ran plentifully, but now it fell drop by solitary drop. DRIP DRIP ...DRIP."

"We stood mouths agape, staring at the sad scene until a voice caught our attention."

"Hey, you lot! What are you doing standing there gawking?"

"Who's that?" asked Anita shyly, looking round.

"Hey, I'm down here! Come a bit closer."

"Can you see what I can see? Is that a stone talking to us or am I beginning to hallucinate out of tiredness?" said Ettore, puzzled.

"If you're hallucinating, that makes two of us," added Anita.

"What do you mean hallucinating, kids? Are you talking to your slug friend or are you talking to me? We're all part of nature. What's all this discrimination about?" replied the stone.

"I'm not a slug, I'm a Snail," I protested with force.

"For that matter I'm not a stone, I'm a piece of very ancient, highly prized primordial rock, but I don't go on about it. I had the impression you needed help, but if you don't I'll go back to being a stone as you call it."

That 'piece of very ancient primordial rock' wasn't much to my liking but, luckily, Ettore was more patient than I was.

"No, wait! Sorry but we didn't know!"

"Well, we S-T-O-N-E-S actually know a great deal of things. Let me tell you that we've been here since before your grandparents and the great-grandparents of your great-grandparents and the great-grandparents of the great-grandparents of your great-grandparents ..." It was as if the stone was never going to stop talking.

"Excuse me, Mister Primordial Rock, seeing how you know all these things, you couldn't tell us where the spring water has gone, could you?" interrupted Anita, politely.

"Be patient, my dears, I was just about to get on to that."

"You're right, but we're in a bit of a hurry!"

"Right, you young folks are always in a rush! Let me give you a piece of advice. Nature does things in its own time. If you allow it to, it'll help you." Having said that, the stone fell back into its timeless sleep. We were going to have to wait.

"The minutes went by, maybe an hour even, then something began to change among the tocks in front of us."

“Look!’ I exclaimed loudly.

“What? Where?’

“There’s something written on the rock. Come on, let’s read what it says!”

“But it’s not in our language,’ complained Anita.

“Don’t worry, Anita, we aren’t alone! Hey, kids! Yes, I’m talking to you! What are you doing, aren’t you going to help us?’ *

“We filled in the letters and a rivulet spurted from the rock.

“HURRAY!’ We cried happily.”

* For teacher: help the kids to find the “magic word”.

The word is ENVIRONMENT.

Write some letters on the blackboard and ask kids to find the missing letters.

For example:

E _ _ _ R _ _ M _ N _

CHAPTER 3

The Village of Traditional Knowledge

“Everything that was touched by the water returned to its proper color. Witnessing the scene, our hearts filled with joy. We were on the right path!

“Goodness, Snail, did you see what happened? We’ve saved the Valley, let’s go and tell the grown-ups!’ said Anita.

“Steady on, easy does it! The environment’s vital for the Valley to prosper, but it’s not the only thing that’s necessary. We’ve still got a long way to go and we still have a lot of questions to ask!’

“What else do we need?’ asked Ettore.

“We’ll soon find out. As you yourselves said, we’ve got to look at what surrounds us with curious eyes. And you’ll see, nature will help us, as it just has done.’

“But here everything’s the same!’ said Anita.

“One morning at dawn during one of my long journeys to school, I heard two elks speaking about a Village in which Traditional Knowledge is kept. It’ll be submerged in the Great Grayness now, but we can still try to find it!’ I said to encourage them.

“Fantastic, how do we do that?’ replied Ettore, sarcastically.

“Nature will guide us. We only have to ask.’ “NATURE, SHOW US THE WAY TO THE VILLAGE OF TRADITIONAL

KNOWLEDGE!’ ordered Ettore, but nothing happened.

“‘Maybe do it more politely,’ I suggested.

“‘Lady Nature, please would you show us the way to the Village of Traditional Knowledge?’ asked Anita tentatively.

A tiny little bird with bright-colored feathers started flitting around us, twittering happily and showing us the way through the closely planted trees.

“‘How efficient Nature is!’ exclaimed Ettore in amazement.

“‘As you can see, all it takes is a little kindness.’

“‘We followed the bird’s happy singing until we came out of the woods and found ourselves walking along a pathway. On either side grew very tall, closely planted stalks of corn that blocked our view. It was difficult for us to find our bearings, but it didn’t take long for us to come to a small village. It was the Village we’d heard about.

“‘The houses were pretty but colorless, just like the faces of the villagers who were wandering round the streets. A dusty wood plaque was hanging on one of the first houses in the village: *‘The Village of Traditional Knowledge conserves the memory, traditions and culture of its community and will always welcome those who wish to know their origin, but they must always bring the right questions with them.’*

As we gradually asked the right questions to get to know the inhabitants of the Village, their faces filled with color: the farmer’s checked shirt turned red and blue again and the cook’s uniform went brilliant white. But the houses were still gray ... there was still one last thing left to do!”

CHAPTER 4

The bite of the apple

“‘It was the village cook who showed us the path we had to take to continue on our way. When we thanked him and bade him farewell, he handed us a bundle. ‘Just in case you get hungry,’ he said.

“‘We’d been walking along the path for a few minutes when Ettore asked me, ‘Snail, now where do we go?’

“‘Ah, I’ve no idea, I was following you.’

“‘You were following us but we were following you. Where are we going?’

“‘There’s only one way, it’s bound to go somewhere,’ I said.

“‘Now in place of the dense cornfield we’d walked through before entering the Village there was an apple orchard, just as vast and closely planted and it too devoid of any color other than gray. I couldn’t tell you how far we walked but the landscape around us never changed. At last a tall tree with bright green leaves broke the monotony: it was a huge oak tree and it towered majestically in the middle of a meadow. ‘Look over there. We could climb to the top of the tree to see what there is around us,’ said Ettore.

“‘Let’s go and see,’ replied Anita cautiously.

“‘I knew that tree and I also knew that our journey was at its end. Now it was my young friends’ turn.

“‘Look, there are some words carved on the trunk,’ called out Anita. Never step looking at the world with

curious eyes,' she read out loud. 'It's our motto!'

"I knew you would make it!' I said happily.

"If you knew, why didn't you say anything?'

"If my speed has taught me anything, it's that it isn't important to come in first at the finishing line, what counts is what we learn on the way there.'

"What now?' asked Ettore, anxiously.

"Ettore, haven't you cottoned on yet? We ask nature!' said Anita cheerfully.

"And as she said it, she knocked three times on the tree trunk. KNOCK ... KNOCK ... KNOCK ...

"The outline of the face of an old woman appeared on the tree.

"Snail, what a pleasure to see you. Who've you brought to see me?'

"Come on, don't be shy. Introduce yourselves, kids,' I said to encourage them.

"Erm, pleased to meet you, Mrs. Oak, I'm Ettore.'

"And I'm his sister, Anita.'

"It was brave of you to come this far! Have you discovered the importance of environment and culture. They're two of the elements that make Ark Valley so different. But there's still something missing!' said the Oak.

"Erm, let's think ...'

"So ...'

"I'm sorry, no, nothing comes to mind!' said Anita after a while.

"Give us a clue!' begged Ettore.

"I know they gave you something in the village,' suggested the Oak.

"We remembered the bundle the cook had been so kind to give us and now for the first time we were curious to open it. Inside we found some apples that were different from the ones we had always eaten before. They were small and round but flat at the top and the bottom, straw yellow in color with soft shades of red. "They look scrumptious,' said Anita.

"What are you waiting for? Taste them! Tell me about the flavor and take the shriveled taste buds of an old lady like me back in time!' the Oak egged us on.

"After a bite or two ...

"Excellent, they're super-tasty!' said Ettore, who was thrilled.

"Anita and Ettore started describing the new discovery in detail, and as they gradually tasted the apples, the gray apple orchard disappeared to leave way for a few trees scattered here and there over the meadow, and laden with the apples the children were eating.

"What's happening?' asked Anita in amazement.

"There used to be apple orchards with this variety of apple in this meadow. The Village of Traditional Knowledge has carefully conserved their memory but ... on the understanding that there'll always be someone around to recognize their flavor!" the Oak explained.

"Environment, culture and taste: this is what we have to seek to understand with curious eyes if we don't want the diversity of Ark Valley to be lost," explained Anita.

"That's right, my dear, but we need everyone to make that happen!"

"You can say that again," joked Ettore. "We walked all that way but we didn't realize that all we had to do was stop by the cook in the Village of Traditional Knowledge for him to prepare us something so delicious."

"Never fear, a nice surprise is awaiting you. Knock at his door on your way home," said the Oak with a chuckle.

"Hurray, I love surprises!" chortled Anita.

"So, what are you waiting for? Start running!" said the Oak and bade us farewell.

"Seeing me hesitate, Anita asked me, 'Snail, what are you still doing there? Come on, get a move on!'"

"I'm already home, my brave young friend," I replied."

This last sentence left Mother Snail's audience gaping. They looked around. So was that the Great Oak? Sensing all the questions she could see flashing in their eyes, Mother Snail prepared to bring her story to an end. "Anita and Ettore often came back to see me and they used to sit down where you're sitting now. They started bringing their friends, and soon my voice was being heard by all the communities in Ark Valley. How long ago did all this happen? Who can say ... Do you understand now, Mario? There's no need to look for heroes in who knows what other world. We can be the heroes and heroines of our land ourselves. Often all it takes is small gestures."

Mother Snail ended her story and smiled at her young listeners. She knew fine and well they would be back with more questions in the days to come. All the children stood up, said goodbye and happily ran out to play in the meadow. All of them ... except Mario, who shyly approached her and asked, "Mother Snail, we're still friends, aren't we?"

"Of course we are, my little friend. Curiosity is the virtue of youth ... but don't try ever again to remind me how old I am!"

