

CHAPTER 1

Akara Receives a Gift

The call for help came loud and clear, but only one person was near enough to hear it. On this spring afternoon, the road beside the river was deserted except for a young girl in her teens.

She was walking slowly, pulling behind her a wooden cart piled high with homespun cloth bags. The cry jolted her out of a pleasant daydream, and she stopped and looked around. It had come from somewhere near at hand, but where? Just ahead, and screened from her by bushes, was a place where the river tumbled over huge rocks into a turbulent pool. The call seemed to come from that direction. She knew that people sometimes crossed the river on those rocks, but the crossing was difficult.

She ran forward, still dragging the cart, past the barrier of bushes. Her guess was right; there was someone in the water! She could see a head bobbing above the surface.

“Help!” The call came again, a man’s voice! She looked around wildly. There was no one else in sight. Dropping the handle of the cart, she ran toward the bank.

The man was clinging with one hand to a piece of wood that kept his head above the swirling water. He was weighed down by a pack strapped to his back, and with his free hand, he struggled with the straps that held it. He stopped calling when he caught sight of the girl running toward him.

She had no idea how to help him. Then, as she ran, she caught sight of a large tree limb lying on the ground. That might do it! She veered toward it, seized one end, and with all her strength began tugging it

toward the pool. When she reached the water's edge, she dropped her end of the limb and ran panting to the other end. She lifted it and pushed with all her might. The unwieldy piece of wood slid on the soft mud at the shoreline, then floated into the stream.

The man's head was still above water. The girl kicked off her shoes and waded in behind the limb, pushing it toward him. She was knee-deep in water when he was able to stretch out an arm and grasp its other end. When he did so, the girl backed toward the shore, pulling the limb after her. A few moments later, the man found a firm bottom for his feet and waded ashore. He took off his pack and dropped down at full length on the grass, where he lay breathing heavily.

The girl looked down at him for a moment, then ran to her cart, opened one of the sacks, and pulled out two crumpled towels. By the time she returned, he had caught his breath and was sitting up. She handed one of the towels to him, then dried her feet with the other before slipping on her worn shoes.

The man stood up. He was tall, lean, and broad-shouldered, with a deeply tanned face. He was not young, his hair was streaked with gray, but his movements were sure and vigorous. Blue eyes twinkled down at his rescuer. "You saved my life, young lady," he said with a courtly bow. "I'm very grateful."

The girl flushed and looked at the ground. "I'm glad," she said, shyly. "I'm glad I happened to be passing by."

His eyes took in her straight figure, her well-shaped face, and the patched and faded dress she wore. He thought, she can't be older than fourteen, but she is certainly a quick-thinking young person. She doesn't much look like a local girl; down at this end of the valley, the people are mostly short and stocky. She is not. Aloud, he said, "Let me introduce myself. People call me 'Wenk the Wanderer'. I can swim, but not in that rough water with my heavy pack! If you hadn't come when you did, my wandering days might be over!"

He glanced toward the river and gave a sudden exclamation, "My hat! It's floated ashore!" Off he went with long strides to the water's edge, lifted something black and shapeless from the shallows, and shook it vigorously. It was a broad-brimmed hat. He looked at it fondly, then clapped it on his head and strode back to where the girl stood. She smiled

at his enthusiasm, her shyness gone for the moment.

He returned her smile. "You must be one of Dame Dessit's orphans," he said. She nodded, and he continued, "That means you live up the river at the orphan home, that white house on the hill. And I'll wager that cart is full of dirty laundry you're taking from the village of Palloweth to the home, where you and the other orphans will slave away washing it."

Again, the girl nodded. Wenk turned and rummaged in his pack. "Let me give you something as a sort of 'thank you' for saving my life." He held out a small, silver-colored object. "It's not much, but a wanderer like me doesn't have much to give."

She put both hands behind her. "I don't want a reward, I was happy to help."

"It's not a reward. It's just a little gift I want to give you because I'm thankful. Please accept it!"

The girl hesitated, then slowly reached out and took the object. It was small, only a little longer than the man's hand. "It looks like a little horn," she said,

"People call it a trumpet. I think it is silver, though it's old and battered. It was given to me by an old man in another village. There are a few of these trumpets scattered around this valley. They come from somewhere in the Great Mountains. Some folks believe that in some magical way they bring good fortune."

The girl only half heard this explanation. To imagine how she felt, you must understand that she had never owned anything in her entire life except her clothes. The children who lived in the house on the hill were not allowed to have possessions of their own. So even though the little trumpet was scratched and dented, the girl thought it a most wonderful gift.

"It's beautiful! Thank you! Thank you!" she said. She paused for a moment, uncertainly, "Does it make music?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. At least, I haven't been able to get a sound from it. Perhaps it will do better for you. Try!" Encouraged by Wenk's gentle smile, the girl raised the trumpet to her lips and blew through it softly. Her breath went freely through it, but no sound emerged. She blew again with the same result.

“Have you ever blown a trumpet?”

“No.”

“A trumpet — any trumpet — is just a tube of metal. Air will go right through it, as you just found out. To make a sound with a trumpet you must press your lips together and then blow through it. The problem is, this trumpet won’t let you do that. Try it and you’ll see!”

The girl squeezed her lips together and blew, but now she could force no breath through the trumpet at all. It was as if a little door inside the instrument had closed. She relaxed her lips, and again her breath flowed through easily.

Wenk watched her, still smiling in his gentle way. “Strange, isn’t it? You’re finding, as I did, that it won’t make a sound whichever way you blow it. I’m sorry. I wish it would.”

“It’s all right,” she reassured him. “I like it anyway!” She stopped suddenly and her eyes widened. “Oh! I must get back with the laundry or Dame Dessit will be angry!”

Wenk looked northward toward the white house. “I’d go with you to pull the cart and to explain the delay to Dame Dessit, but she knows me and disapproves of me.” He shook his head. “It’s best she doesn’t even see me; it would just make matters worse.”

The girl smiled. “I’ll be all right. I’ll try to slip in through the back way. Thank you so much for my trumpet, and I...I...” She paused, not knowing how to finish, then burst out, “I hope your clothes dry!”

She scooped up the towels, turned and dashed for her cart. There she stuffed them into the sack they had come from, then tucked the silver trumpet in after them.

“You haven’t told me your name!” Wenk called after her.

“It’s Akara. Good-bye!” She waved a farewell and picked up the handle of the cart.

Wenk stood watching until the girl with her cart reached the top of the hill. There she turned and passed out of his sight toward the rear of the house. “No sign of Dame Dessit,” he muttered. “I hope she doesn’t catch the girl. I wish I could give her a better gift than the little trumpet.” He sighed, slung his wet pack over his shoulder, and set off in the other direction toward Palloweth.