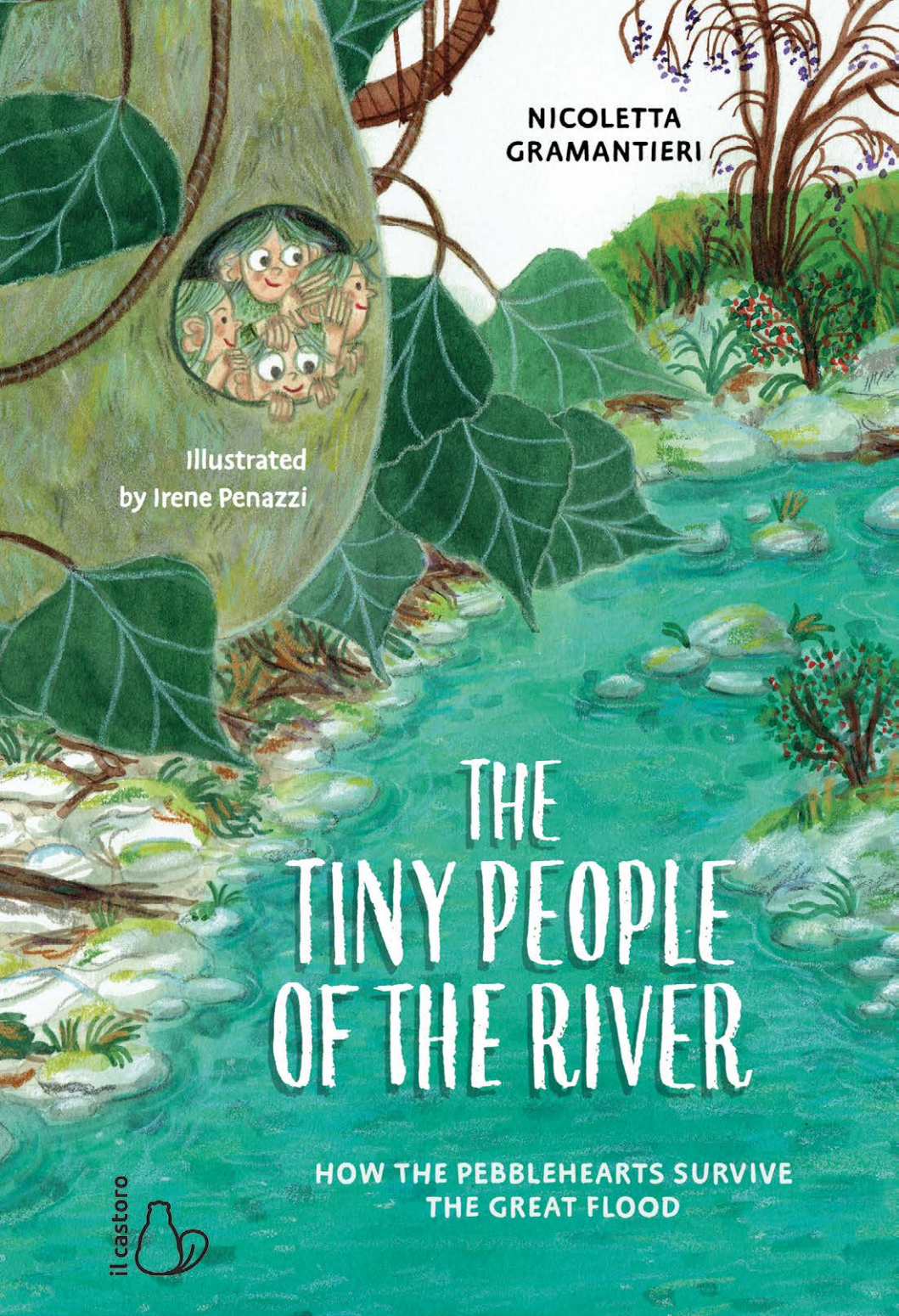




NICOLETTA
GRAMANTIERI

Illustrated
by Irene Penazzi

THE TINY PEOPLE OF THE RIVER

HOW THE PEBBLEHEARTS SURVIVE
THE GREAT FLOOD

il castoro



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Nicoletta Gramantieri
The Tiny People of the River
How the Pebblehearts survive the Great Flood
Illustrated by Irene Penazzi

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CHAPTER 1

In which we learn who the Pebblehearts are.



The Pebblehearts have lived in the valley, along the riverside, for thousands of years. It is said that once upon a time there were many more of them than there are today. Now only just over a hundred Pebblehearts live in the valley, in six separate colonies. The Upper Pebblehearts live next to the spring that gives life to the river, below the roaring, foaming waterfall. Theirs is the smallest and oldest colony. The Lower Pebblehearts live in the place where the valley widens out, just a mile or so above the plain. All the others live in between, and indeed they are

all known as the Middle Pebblehearts. Some of them have their homes near a humpback bridge, some on the slopes at the edge of a steep gorge, and others around a mill that has been abandoned for centuries. And then there are our Pebblehearts, who built their village on three little meanders that start in a little gorge, continue through a series of tiny, low waterfalls, and end at a tall cliff. They're called the Good Pebblehearts, though no one can remember why.

There are many legends that tell of the Pebblehearts' origins, but perhaps it will be enough for you to know that they're river creatures who are around six centimetres tall. From a distance you might mistake them for tiny frogs: they usually dress in green, they have webbed feet, large knees and blonde hair that has a greenish tinge to it like the slime on the surface of pebbles. If you were

to look closer, however, you would see their long hands with hairy knuckles, their large eyes, their upturned noses and their rounded, slightly protruding ears on the tops of their heads. But I doubt that any of us humans have ever seen them from close up.

It is said that the river carries their babies directly to the doors of the houses in which they are destined to live. This is a very rare event: the river only produces such gifts once every fifty years. Then again, fifty years is not such a very long time in the life of a Pebbleheart; apparently, every Pebbleheart lives for at least three hundred and fifty years.

They spend these long lives of theirs among the pebbles at the edge of the river, in comfortable homes built out of twigs and mud, and pass their time making their days comfortable and happy.



CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST MONTH OF WINTER

In which we celebrate the solstice and
get to know the Pebblehearts by name



This year, the Winter Festival is taking place at Gemory's house. The Pebblehearts decided on that together because Gemory's house is right in the middle of the riverside where they live: that way, no one will have to walk too far to get to the festival. Mackrill and Laceley have two thousand, two hundred and twenty-two steps to walk because they live right on the west edge of the Pebblehearts' territory. Eventon and Celeste, on the other hand, live right on the east edge, right underneath the

Infinite Rock. They're the ones who have to walk the furthest, about three thousand five hundred steps.

Three thousand five hundred steps might not seem terribly many, but when you have to climb up and down and skip over the grey pebbles at the river's edge, they turn into quite an ordeal.

In winter it's a bit easier, because the ground is asleep and even the weeds that grow in between the pebbles stay down in their roots without coming up to look for light, without reaching up towards the sky.

All the other Pebblehearts' houses are closer to Gemory's, which is a solid, well-built home at the foot of an alder tree.

All the Pebblehearts' homes look the same; they're built up above the pebbles, leaning against large rocks or bushes or the trunks of the riverside trees.

They're solid domes of mud and clay mixed with twigs and sticks, which keep the rain out and stay cool in the summer.

Inside, they usually have a spacious kitchen, which also doubles as the living room, and then several smaller rooms: bedrooms, larders, and studies or workrooms.



Laceley wakes up at dawn because he loves festivities and can't wait to get going. He packs their bags with provisions, brushes their green tunics and hangs their jackets to warm in front of the fire. From time to time, he peeps round the bedroom door to see whether Makrill has woken up. Mackrill is snoring contentedly. In the end, Laceley has to shake him awake.

“Come on, we need to get going,” he whispers.

Mackrill grumbles: “It’s early, we’ve got all the time in the world.”

So Laceley makes him a mug of calamint tea and a bowl of hazelnut crumb porridge and places them on the bedside table. This is enough to persuade Mackrill who, with a big yawn sits up, eats, drinks, and becomes his usual smiley happy self again.

“Oh, Laceley, you’ve even warmed up our jackets!” he exclaims, delighted at the prospect of the cosy, woolly layer. He slips his hand under his pillow and pulls out a soft bundle. “A present for you,” he says. “A new cap.”

It’s not so much a cap as a long, pointy bobble hat; when Laceley puts it on, the tip swings down in between his shoulders.

“When did you make this, Mackrill?” he asks.

“I got my knitting needles out each time you were out, while I was waiting for you to come back. Sometimes you were out for a thousand stitches, sometimes just for two hundred. It made waiting for you more fun.”

“And where did you get the wool?”

“From Furi and Genette, as always. Tufts of rabbit fur that they found last summer. It must have been a nutbrown rabbit.”

“Like tasty hazelnuts! And at least it’s not green.”



“Green is beautiful, it’s the colour of the river, the grass, and fresh spring leaves.”

“That’s true, but you know how I get fed up with things. Even

with all the green. Right now, my favourite colours are cherry red, chamomile yellow, and sky blue.”

“Next time I’ll find a way to make you a red cap.”

“No, I like this nutbrown one a lot. It’s the loveliest hat I’ve ever had.”

Mid-morning, the two of them knock on the door of Gale’s house, eight-hundred steps away from their own. They would walk the rest of the way to Gemory’s house along with her.

“What a lovely hat you’ve got, Laceley.”

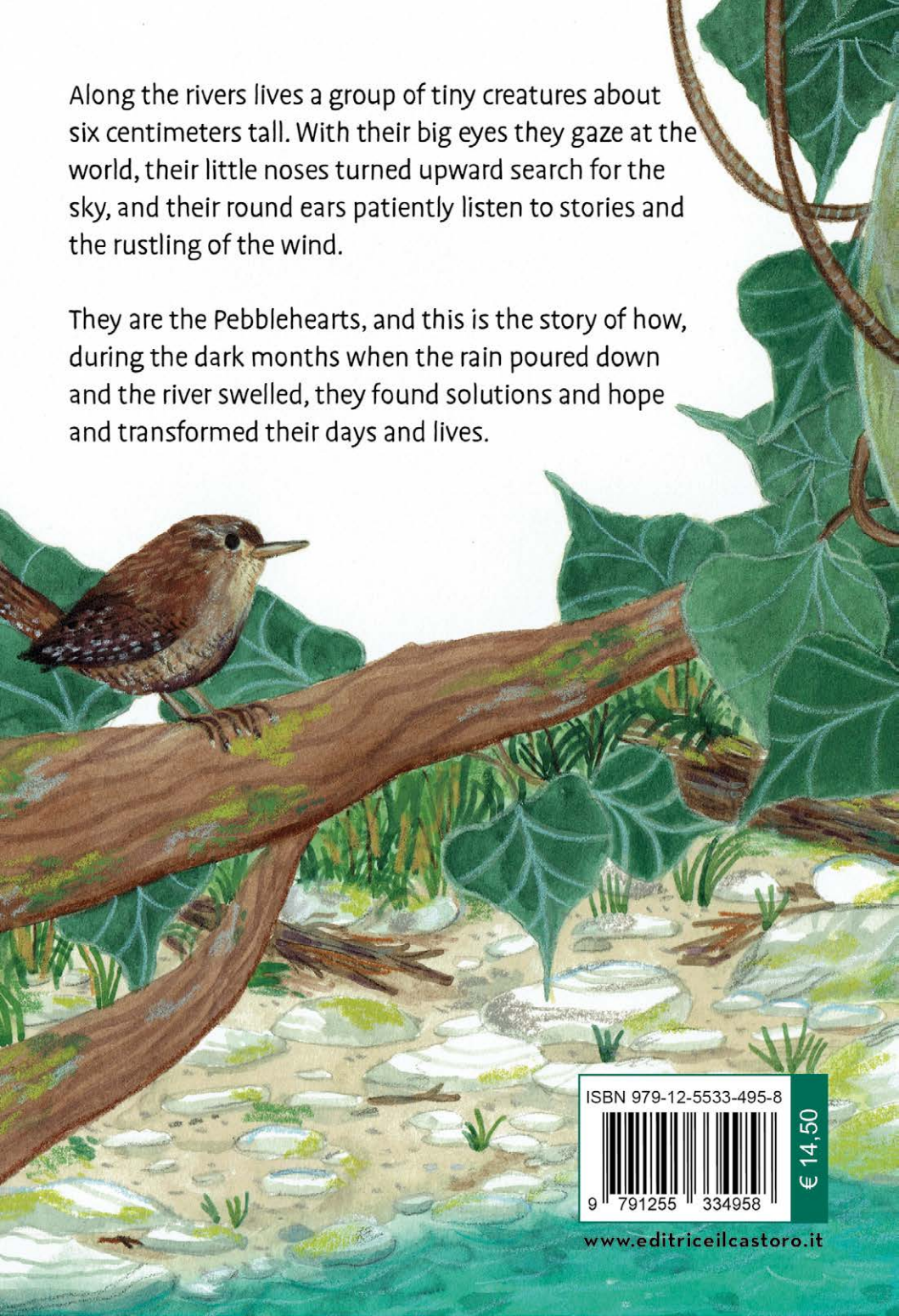
“Mackrill made it for me, I love it too. What have you got in there? It’s a very big bag.”

“Presents for everyone. Bowls, cutlery, little bells, drum sticks. We’ll need something new to celebrate the longest night with.”

It is a grey day and a light mist has settled on the surface of the river.

Along the rivers lives a group of tiny creatures about six centimeters tall. With their big eyes they gaze at the world, their little noses turned upward search for the sky, and their round ears patiently listen to stories and the rustling of the wind.

They are the Pebblehearts, and this is the story of how, during the dark months when the rain poured down and the river swelled, they found solutions and hope and transformed their days and lives.



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