

## THE MAGIC GIFTS

A Basque fairytale

Retold and adapted by Sophie Masson

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IN THE beautiful green hills of the Basque country, three brothers lived together on a little farm. The farm might be small, but it was fertile, and well-kept, with fields and an orchard clustered around a trim little house, painted red and white in the Basque style.

Every week, one of the brothers would take it in turns to go to market and sell their produce. Depending on the season, it might be tomatoes, or apples, or peppers, or cherries, or cheese, or grapes, or eggs, or many other things.

One fine market morning, the eldest brother, Eneko, set off with a sack full of fine grapes. Along the road, he met an old lady, who asked him, ‘So where are you going with your sack?’

‘To market,’ Eneko replied.

‘And what will you sell there?’ she asked, nosily.

‘Horns,’ he replied, annoyed by her question.

‘May you sell many horns then,’ she said, quietly, and went on her way.

When he arrived at the market-place, Eneko undid his sack. What was his shock and horror, when he saw that instead of fine grapes the sack was full of dirty, smelly old cowhorns! Quickly, he tied up the sack again, for he didn’t want to be a laughing-stock, and went off home without a word. And he didn’t tell his brothers what had happened, but buried the sack in the field.

The next week, along went Iban, the middle brother, to market, with a sack full of juicy apples. On the road, who should he meet but an old lady who asked him, ‘Where are you going with your sack?’

‘To market,’ he replied.

‘And what will you sell there?’ she asked, curiously.

‘Toads,’ he replied, thinking it a fine joke.

‘May you sell many toads then,’ she said, gently, and went on her way.

Well! Of course you can guess what happened! Instead of the juicy apples Iban was expecting, what should he find in his sack but cross croaking toads and if he hadn't quickly tied up the sack and fled, they would have hopped out all over the market! Iban stopped at the river on the way home and tipped out all the toads then took to his heels. And he never told his brothers what had happened.

Now it was the third week, and the turn of the youngest brother to go to market, with a sack full of fresh vegetables. On the way, there was the old lady, who asked him, 'Where are you going, with your sack?'

'To market, *Amatxi*,'—which means Grandmother—he replied, 'where I will sell fresh vegetables.'

'How much do you sell your vegetables for, Mikel?' she asked.

The youngest brother was a little surprised that she knew his name, but he replied, 'What they're worth, *Amatxi*. Would you like to have a look and select those you like?'

'*Eskerrik asko*, thank you, Mikel,' she said, 'but I have already many vegetables in my garden. But you are a kind, polite boy, and so to reward you, I will give you this tablecloth.' And she took out a fine linen tablecloth, in Basque stripes of red and green. 'Wherever you spread this tablecloth out,' she said, 'you will instantly find it covered with the most delicious food and drink, enough for the finest meal.'

'*Eskerrik asko, Amatxi*,' stammered Mikel, astonished and grateful, for he knew then that the old woman must really be a *lamina*, a fairy. He was about to take his leave with the tablecloth when she took first a flute, then a knife, from her pocket and said, 'These are for you also. When you play the flute, all the animals who hear you will come to you. And with the knife you will be safe from attack, from beasts or men, simply by taking it out.'

Mikel thanked the old lady again. 'With these gifts I could travel the world,' he said. 'I've always wanted to do that, *Amatxi*.'

'Then that is just what you should do,' she said, smiling, 'for a brave heart and a quick step go well with what I have given you.' So off went Mikel with the magic gifts. He did not go to market, but back to the farm where he made his goodbyes to his brothers and then set off to see the world.

He walked and walked for days and days, stopping from time to time under a tree to spread out his tablecloth and eat and drink his fill. Then one day he came to a beautiful valley, green and lush, and in it a fine farm, with rich rolling pastures and

thousands of sheep. It was owned by a rich man who should have been happy but was not, for every night, when the shepherds brought in his sheep, there was one missing. And there was nothing anyone could do about it, because the sheep were not being taken by an eagle or a bear or a wolf or a fox or any of the usual mountain beasts. Oh no, it was said that it was an enormous Herensuge, a dragon, who lived in a cave on the mountain and came out to eat a sheep at nightfall, every single night. And everyone was much too scared of that Herensuge to think of even looking for it. Who knew it might not get a taste for human flesh as well?

But Mikel wasn't scared. He went to the rich landowner and said, 'I will rid you of your problem.'

'How?' asked the landowner, blinking, for Mikel was small and thin and not at all ferocious-looking.

'I can't tell you how,' said Mikel, 'but will you let me be your shepherd tomorrow?'

'Very well,' said the landowner, after a moment's thought, 'though you know it might not just be another sheep the Herensuge takes but you as well?'

Now Mikel might be the youngest of the three brothers, but just as the old lady had seen, he was also the bravest, and the quickest of step. 'We'll see about that when the time comes,' he said, smiling, and so the rich man gave him the job and off Mikel went the next day with the flock of sheep, up the mountainside. It was a lovely sunny day and Mikel was happy in the flowery mountain meadow watching the sheep. Once, he saw an eagle soaring in the sky, and another time a fox poked its nose around a rock, and he heard the howling of a wolf not far away and saw bear paw prints in some soft ground. But none of those animals disturbed him and the grazing sheep. At lunchtime Mikel laid out his magic tablecloth and ate a fine meal, then he lay down for a nap. Still nothing disturbed the flock, no beast came near. Somewhere, Mikel knew, the Herensuge lay in wait. But it would not come out before the night started to fall. He was not afraid. He had the lamina's knife to protect him--and his own courage, which was its own magic.

Soon the shadows lengthened. It was time to call the sheep home. Mikel took out his flute and began to play. At once, all the sheep came running—but so did the eagles and wolves and foxes and bears and hares and marmots and all the beasts of the mountain. What was more, here too came the Herensuge, drawn out of his cave like all the others at the sound of the flute, and making all the other animals fall back

in fear. But Mikel did not budge. The Herensuge was puzzled. Everyone and everything always ran from it, but this boy did not. Why not? Roaring horribly, it rushed at Mikel, who did not blink but calmly drew out the magic knife and faced the beast. Instantly, the Herensuge fell over, dead.

‘Well, that’s the end of our sheep-devourer,’ said Mikel, ‘but I wonder if that’s the end of it all?’

‘I want to be your shepherd again tomorrow,’ he told the landowner that night.

‘Gladly,’ said the landowner, overjoyed all his flock had survived.

So again Mikel went to the mountain pastures the next day, and again he had a lovely peaceful day on the mountain, and a fine free lunch. When the shadows started to fall, he played his flute, and again the sheep came running, and all the beasts of the mountain. And then out from a deep cave came another roaring Herensuge, bigger than the first. Mikel drew his knife and the dragon gave a screech and fell down dead.

‘Well, now,’ said Mikel, ‘never two without three,’ and so that night, he told the landowner he wanted to be shepherd again.

‘As you wish,’ said the landowner, stunned by the news there had not been one but two dragons munching on his sheep.

So the next day Mikel went back to the mountain with the sheep. Again, he spent a peaceful day. Again, as night fell, he played his flute, and again a huge Herensuge, bigger than the first two, came surging out of the mountain caves, with a deafening roar. Mikel drew his knife; the dragon fell down dead.

Only this time, as Mikel gathered the sheep, he realised one was missing. ‘I can’t go back without it,’ he thought, and telling the flock to wait for him, off he went following the trail of the last Herensuge. And thus it was that he came to a cavern, an enormous cavern, littered with bones, which must have been the dragons’ home. And there, sitting in a corner, the missing sheep by her side, alive and well, was a beautiful girl with long hair and sad eyes. She jumped up when she saw Mikel and coming to him with hands outstretched, said, ‘It’s a hundred years since I’ve been held prisoner in this cave by the Herensuges, and now I’m free. *Eskerrik asko!*’

‘It is I who must thank you,’ said Mikel, shaking her hand and smiling broadly, ‘for looking after our lost sheep!’

Then together the two of them, with the sheep gambolling after them, went hand in hand down the mountain, and back to the farm, to the cheers and applause

of the whole valley. And I've heard it said that not all that long after, wedding bells tolled merrily for a happy young couple who everyone loved. They received many, many gifts over their long lives. But the ones they kept the most precious were the ones the old lady had given Mikel, one fine market morning, long ago: a tablecloth, a flute, and a knife.

### **Afterword:**

This story comes from the folklore of the Basque people, who inhabit an area known as the Basque Country (in Basque, this is *Euskal Herria*) which is situated in the western Pyrenees region of far south-west France and north-west Spain. It's a beautiful region of big mountains, small farms, charming villages of red and white and green and white houses set amongst rolling green hills, gracious seaside towns, dramatic surf beaches and dynamic cities. The Basques are a very ancient people, indigenous to that part of Europe (and indeed, it's believed they were once spread all over Europe as the original Stone Age inhabitants before later migrations occurred). The Basque language, Euskara, is a non-Indo-European language, and unrelated to any other European language. The Basques are great sailors, warriors, travellers, shepherds and farmers and as well as in the original European homelands, there are Basque communities all over the world too, especially in North America (the US and Canada) where Basques settled from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The Basque people have a long, turbulent history, and as they are very independent and fiercely defensive of their ancient culture, they have frequently come into conflict with the cultures around them, including into modern times. They have a rich treasury of traditional stories, full of fantastic fairytales, folktales, myths and legends, set against the dramatic landscapes of the Basque homelands. Some of the magical beings and creatures to be found in these stories include the *Herensuge*, the dragons which appear in this story as well as many others (sometimes they are depicted with seven heads, sometimes, as in this tale, with just one); the *laminak*, or fairies; the *basajaun*, or hairy forest giants, and the *tartaro*, a sort of one-eyed ogre. In the stories, the *laminak* (plural of 'lamina') are always female, though they may be young or old in appearance. They have great powers and are usually helpful, at least to those who deserve it! The human characters in these stories are often from 'the little people'; that is, they are rarely from the upper classes (there is no native Basque

royalty or even aristocracy, but there are wealthy landowners, as in this story). Instead, they are often farmers, fishers, shepherds and villagers, and qualities such as quick-wittedness, bravery, and kindness are often highlighted in the tales.

The Basque country has a very special place in my heart—and my genes! My mother's family is from the Basque country; my mother was born in Biarritz in the French Basque area and my uncles, aunts and cousins all live there still, while my maternal great-grandmother Antonina Picabea came from the Spanish Basque country, from the town of Tolosa, south of Donostia, or San Sebastian. As a child, I spent a lot of time with my mother's family in the French Basque country and loved the stories I heard and read there. I still visit as often as I can, while my sister Camille who lives in the picturesque little Basque town of Hasparren, inland from Biarritz, works as an artist and as the Vice-President of the Basque Artists' Association.