

**B****OLENTZERO**

In a cave at the foot of a mountain made of stars, the goddess Mari rested and heard from all the animals how things were. She was listening to her favourite traveller the salmon telling his tales of oceans when the inseparables the raven chiefs flew chattering into the cave.

The serpents who formed the arms of her throne stirred and caused her seat and the backrest to move and mutter. "Quiet!" she commanded, "Let them speak." The older raven began: "We were flying over the woods and we heard crying and on the ground lay a woman who had just given birth. She was dead but she had bitten off the cord which bound him and held him to her breast. She had lived for a while and having given the child what milk she had she died. We called the Lamiak, the insects and the ravens. They brought to the child both milk and honey and fed him drop by drop. He is at present alive but he needs proper care."

The mother shook her starry darkness and asked what could be done. The ancient salmon spoke: "There is a wood by the river which flows to the sea. It passes near the water meadow where the goats have their yearly gathering from which with much clattering of horns the male champion emerges and mates with the queen goat, but the kid was taken by the king wolf and the Queen is without kid still but in milk."

Mari thought and chuckled softly, "Let the Lamiak gather withy branches and weave them into a shallow bowl big enough to bear the child." To the ravens she said, "Gather the rooks, the ravens and jackdaws. Let them hold the edges of the bowl and fly with it to the wood of the Akelarre. Tell the queen that it is my command that she suckle the child till her next kid arrives, then shall the birds carry on the duty of feeding to him the fruits and berries for a year. For another year he shall be fed by the fish folk." Then she looked further, smiled to herself and commanded that the child be brought to a man and his wife who would be found cutting wood in the coppice for the charcoal maker who worked in the wood at the edge of the Akelarre. They would nurture him in the way of Man and he would become a Charcoal Maker and so it happened.

When he was one year old he was found by the woodcutter's wife when she brought food for her man as he was working in the wood. "Husband, husband, look what is here? Whose is it? Why is it here? We can't leave him, he has no clothes. He is well fed but filthy and he has lots of bruises and small cuts." She kept on trying to work out some story to account for his presence. At last her husband said: "Well, you wanted a child. He is not mine but he looks as if he will last. But it's your job to look after him."

And so it was. He became part of the woodcutter's family. He was very slow to speak but he seemed to understand the birds, the animals and the fishes, and they could never understand the clouds of insects that would gather around him but never was he stung by them.

One day when he was about seven years old he surprised a mother bear and her cubs who were sleeping. She of course thought he was attacking her children and like all bears began to chase him. He had run some distance, tripped up and fell. The bear was beginning her pounce when a bee landed on her nose and stung her, followed immediately by a swarm of bees buzzing furiously. In the face of this menace the bear stopped, shook her head, growled to herself and through the wall of flying bees between her and the boy, looked at him. Putting both paws over her eyes she whiffed anxiously, seeming to apologise to the little boy, and went back to her cubs.

When he was about twelve, because he spent so much time with the charcoal maker, the old man of the woods, they asked the old man if he could learn the trade from him. "Yes," he said, "as long as he carves those figures for me which he makes out of pieces of wood. From every four he makes, I want one." To this they all agreed and it was so. He accompanied the old man. He helped to clear the wood left over after his father had cut down a tree and cut it into suitable lengths, saved some of the fruit, the acorns, the nuts and the berries left over, and from them grew new plants to replace those cut down.

So he grew to manhood. He learned to clear the ground, mark out the circle, build the charcoal heap and make the clay-lined pit for storing water. He learned how to cut the turfs of grass with which to cover the heap to stop it flaring up. He learned to watch the heap for signs of flame, sharing the task with the old man during the night hours and carving his little animals and birds. He learned to switch between wide attention on the heap to concentration on his carving and he learned how to draw, using charcoal on bark and stone and various earths for colours, especially those that were left in the charcoal heaps after the corns were sifted.

In the spring Akelarre he met a young woman and he saw the night sky in her eyes and she saw in his a vast figure striding through the empty spaces of the earth scattering seed, which sprang to life. They started to live together, building a hut, gathering fruit, nuts, seeds and roots for the cold weather ahead. But in the seventh moon she fell sick and began to bleed. They called in the Sorgina but she could not help and the girl died.

Olentzero was at first inconsolable until, lying by the charcoal heap and looking up at the starry sky, he saw a vision of his beloved and a voice saying, "All things that exist have forms and all forms exist. If you can see me I exist." At that moment the heap suddenly shone with an internal bright light and his heart became free from the stony weight that oppressed him so.

He went back into the world with renewed interest. He began to see how the winged creatures swam in the air and the water creatures flew through the water and that the animals of the land swam and flew over the earth. As he watched so the charcoal maker watched him. One day as he was chewing on a piece of bark his master said, "Tomorrow you must see the sorgins." He thought this was unusual but did not argue. When he was brought into their cave there was a flurry amongst the birds and a chattering and squeaking and growling from the animals. The sorgins looked at him and said to his Master, "Take him away, just ensure that he is at the cave of Aunamendi in three days' time as the sun is at its height."

On that day his master was very careful to make sure that he had his spark stone, his obsidian knives, charcoal and flowers with him. Olentzero had heard of the cave but he knew that only the elders knew where it was, but he had a secret which he had never told. People knew that he could talk to the insects, the birds and the fishes. They did not know that he was friendly with the Lamiak or that they spoke to him. As he walked he could hear them excitedly talking about him. When they came to a bend in the stream his master stopped, took dock leaves, covered his eyes with them and then covered the leaves and his eyes with clay so that he could no longer see, and then with his master leading him he was taken the rest of the way to the cave mouth. Although he could not see, the Lamiak could, so he could have found his way to the cave mouth by himself without his master's help.

At last they arrived. He was told to crawl; this he did. As he crawled his arms touched stone and if he raised his head he could feel stone, he even bumped his head on the roof of the tunnel he was crawling through. At last he could feel space around him, his arms were grabbed and by now his blindfold had dried and cracked, the leaves were taken away. He could not see but he could smell the air. Then as he was still held there was a chanting of an old voice and a whirring noise which seemed to make a circle of fire. Indeed it was a circle of fire, it got brighter until it was like a small sun, then it stopped and a candle was lit by which he could see

where he was. He was standing in front of a wall of the cave. It was covered with images of animals drawn from life. They had been made by a person of great talent, for he saw in each of them that which he himself tried to capture, the very essence of the animal. In the cave with him was the oldest lady and the oldest man in the area. He could not see those who were holding him, he was shivering, being both frightened and excited. The old man and the old woman stopped their chanting and said to him: "Your life depends upon what you do now. We have a space prepared for you to draw upon." "What should I draw?" he said. "Whatever you wish, but you must do it now. It must be a fit image for this place."

There was a pool in the cave. He had his charcoal and his coloured earth. He saw the space prepared for him and as he looked at it he could see the presence of the Lamiak, and they seemed to call up the very essence of the living creatures of the earth, then seemingly the walls of the cave shimmered and changed and it looked to him as though it was a great bear standing tall: the great bear of the northern sky. With the excitement of invention upon him he started to make the image and as he drew and coloured, so it seemed that he brought the strength, the power, and the almost humanity of the bear to life on the wall of the cavern.

At last it was finished. Anything more would spoil it. He felt weak and tired, hungry and thirsty, and there before him on the floor of the cave were two cakes, a small container of honey and three pots of water. The Bas Jaune and the Bas Andrea started to chant and their voices echoed back from the crystal hangings of the cave. It was superb. It was very like an autumn day with frost after a misty night, and the Lamiak were calling his praises. The old ones called to his guardians, "Send Olentzero out into the world." He was taken to the mouth of the tunnel and was told to crawl out. For some reason the way out proved to be harder work than the way in. At last he saw the light in front of him and he crawled out into the light of the setting sun, which shone over the mountains with a rosy golden light. Well, he thought, after that what next?

He walked down the valley and as he did so he was reminded of his dead love, his Neskatozeru and of a favourite place of theirs. He went home and collected his bearskin cloak and went up onto the hill. The moon by now had risen and it was full and the land was lit so that he could see his way easily. He walked slowly up the hill until he came to the oak tree. The moonlight shone through the branches and seemed alive.

Spreading his bearskin cloak, he lay down on it on his back, looking through the bare branches up at the night sky until it seemed to him that the stars were at the ends of the oak's branches and that the branches joined them all together, that the shape of the oak and the shape of the heavens were of one piece and then, as though looking at a still pool, the surface of the pool was disturbed and the oak and the sky changed into a charcoal heap and the branches of wood changed into the Basque people. They were murmuring together and the whole heap was alive and the clouds of smoke were being produced, and as the smoke rose in the pile they seemed to him like bubbles on the stream of the living, which meant very little.

But the work which made them, that had a meaning and a substance. It was like the charcoal which was left after the fire and the smoke. It was as though most of what man did was of very little importance, but that what he left behind was his real nature. He thought of the earth that was used to cover the heap and the rare coloured earths that were left behind for him to use and the occasional solid liquids which were used by the metal workers to make adornments and the black obsidian which could be used to make arrowheads and knives, and then his sight changed again and he saw the sky between the stars crowded with charcoal heaps travelling on shafts of light, so that the heaven was filled with dragonflies, at which he shook himself and came down to earth as though with a bump. But it did cause him to look at his life: his woodcarvings, Neskatozeru his lost love and her unborn child, and his own unknown father and the mystery of his birth. The Lamiak had told him something about it but sequential memory was not strong in them and they were full of magical tales; indeed whenever they were asked how two events were connected their answer was: "It was always due to magic".

He knew from experience that his carving appealed to some of the children. He saw that the chanting of the Name of God while he and his master built the charcoal heap served to keep their minds on the work in hand, that the rubbish and earth which formed its base were important and that the fact that the two of them had to keep attention on the stack at all times to keep the stack from breaking out into flames was a necessary part of the process, that the skins of water were needed to keep the flames from breaking out and that each stack had its own time, which could not be hurried. Even then when it was finished it was needful that the charcoal should be sifted and sorted and passed on to the potters, to the smelters of metal, to the families for cooking and even to the children for drawing, and there were the glassmakers, all of whom could derive benefit from this lowly substance charcoal.

And then it occurred to him that at the period of the lighting of new fire at the new year he could make a journey around all the homes in the valley, bringing gifts of carvings and charcoal and combine these with waybread and salt, so that the idea of free giving should be kept alive amongst the people, and so it was and is amongst our folk and should not end.

In the morning he awoke to find his master looking at him. "Well you have had a busy day haven't you, and now I suppose you'll be off on your own." "No" he said, "I shall be with you for many years to come, even unto death." His master reached out to him and slapped palms with him, saying, "Hello friend, there is much to do, the task is urgent but there is plenty of time and many companions along the journey."

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