

BEMBO

A Short Story

By Ray Lynott



They would look at the shadowy child sometimes and shake their heads muttering dismay at her bad fortune or sighing their less articulate despair, or most often and more quietly they whispered together their fear of her presence among them. She must never notice, they said, until the men came back from the mountain. But all the women who came about her, or watched her move down to the well to the horses or around the fire, felt in the deepest part of themselves the great uneasiness that was the same as any ordinary fear only more —

The sky could move, the earth might open, the mountain crumble down from its round shape, — the girl might —

Around the huts trees of all sizes were packed in a tight circle yet the mountain remained in the eyes of their minds — it was above the trees at the sky; and the brown river running below out of the black deepest well with a sharp quick sound until it joined the other grey water off across the disappearing distance in the far ring of hills — the river was there. All there ever, the very old man said, since the giants. But the girl if she — — The milk might sour again, like in the cold months the cattle might die, and there were the five women, five men and five children that had to be put into fire in the hole behind the big tree. Only now there were no cattle, almost nothing except a potfull, and the scrawny heifer belonging to the mad woman the girl called second mother

The cold was over and the ground softer and in the coming days new cattle would have to be taken from the crooked eyed ones across the other side of the river, and the berries would have to be plentiful and the boars come back to the woods or — —

And what about the girl —

The men and young men had been silent when they went out of the huts through the trees and up to the mountain.

Now the very old man kept a good fire under the black pot in the space in front of the huts. The steam was going up always to mix with mists which came in the morning before the sun. He hadn't left the fire all the time they were away and by now the black and grey ash was spreading out from the pot everywhere.

Often the girl went to the very old man. She remembered him ten summers now, before that she was too young to remember. But he was never stirring the pot before there on his own with the huts away in a silent circle and the women sitting in them sewing and most of the horses gone from the place in the ring beyond where they kept them. She was hungry but it would be wrong to ask anybody except the first mother for food no matter how the steam smelled.

"Just now or ever — — I have no place telling you."

The girl had picked up an ember that was grey and brittle at the bottom and still a little red at the narrower top.

"But I won't say or tell another —

"No matter if you won't

"And — — I don't remember them going before — —

"They went.

"All of them?" She shook the ember round her head in the breeze and it reddened more, tiny sparks were falling away.

"All — bars the very young ones and myself there's ten or more times now." He seemed to be thinking.

"Will you tell me a story?"

"No stories.

"Nothing?" she pleaded.

"You have too many questions all times — — go to your place."

She shook the ember again turning round on her heel holding it in the air. Bright live pieces and grey ashey dead pieces were falling. She stopped. It was the falling away, all the pieces, the way the very old man used say lights in the night sky were pieces of the great creature giants had cut up. Supposing — — — She looked at the very old man

"Are there pieces — of people?"

He went on stirring without a word. Now no more of his stories. Supposing herself — ? She walked away slowly, going nowhere in particular.

The very old man looked after her. He had seen her run and jump and turn herself over like none of the other girls, more like an animal. Now they said she screeched like a wild bird in among the trees and her eyes were a wild and dark shade of blue. In the last while her arms had got too long and her legs were the same, not like a girl's at all.

She stood away from him hoking the ash slowly with her toe. The girl remembered that the very old man had been the best other times, even stroking her hair eyes shut while he told stories and let her at his knee. And he had given her the grand name from the long hair she had before the first mother cut it off. The second mother was the only one called her by the name. The hair used to be so long she could shake her head and it would flow down below her shoulders — it was fire, and it would fly behind when she was running with the horses then it was sparks of the wind. Now whenever she looked in the still part of the well against the brown stones all she could see was the dull woollen hand around her head the same as the old women had to wear and it was ugly for her face.

And they had chased her with a whin bush from

being near the horses in these last days.

Not even an answer from the very old man.

The first mother was calling. Her voice pierced the more in telling the girl to leave the fire and come to the sewing in the hut. The girl went over and stood in the doorway for a minute. All of them sat sewing like grey crows pecking at a rabbit — just one piece of cloth into pleats and pleats since the men went. All except the second mother who sat in the corner a dark bundle mumbling and scratching a scab that was across her forehead. It was the way the second mother was now, one hand scratching the black thing and always big wet drops on her lined black leathery face. If she looked at the girl the drops would roll down and off her rough chin.

They said the second mother used to be beautiful, that she had come out of the trees one day from nowhere — — and they were going on to say more that time only they noticed the child listening, it was winter and she had crept up from the corner — something about the rough man how he had leaped two hills for her, killed three bulls and drunk their blood, as well as answering the five riddles that were asked out of the hollow of a tree — — and the first mother was angry that night putting her back and scolding the other women for waking the child. It was a few winters since. The first mother had been so angry that she cursed the second mother when she thought the girl had gone asleep. But the girl heard it, only her eyes were closed, and that time she was glad the second mother was down with the cow she kept tied among the horses. Now the cow was walking in its death they said and the second mother would sit in the corner and when she looked at the girl her eyes were wet hollow stones out of a stormy river.

It had never been the way before. They were all sitting — waiting, nothing else at all —

It was black, it was like a black bird that was so big when he spread his wings the sky was gone and only dark shadows hung from the huts and the trees and even around the fire and the very old man. The shadows were wet somehow as if the bird might be — in a great lot of rain —

But the sky was there. Just for a short time when the girl had stood in the door between inside and out — it was gone. And then the first mother shouted at her and gave her cloth to hold and before long the time passed. The cloth was great and broad like a skirt and in the darkness of the hut it wasn't possible to see any colour in it. The women sewed pleat after pleat until it went on into a very

long time even though the girl knew it was only one night, before Samhain. Still on — half asleep.

Then somewhere there was the sound of the few horses moving — they had heard something the way horses hear, the other horses far away in the distance and then nearer. The men must be coming back some woman said. The cloth dropped. They rushed to the doors. And there were all the men and the boys, clay on their faces and mists of the morning around them coming back out of the trees.

It was the very early day and they came into the circle before the fire the very old man still grey standing there, each of them had a green bunch in one hand and a yellow bunch of new flowers in the other. The mist went behind them back into the trees and slowly the sun was coming to light on the flowers which each of the men were putting beside each door of the huts.

They were singing. And the women sat down at the doorways and the men moved for a long time over and back and down around the fire to the old man, his feet were moving too. Then the men sat in a group and the women brought to each of them a plate of what the very old man had boiled in the pot. After that the singing and the dancing went on through the middle of the day and through the cooler evening to the fall of the green light. The girl had never seen the like before. She was hungry. Over and back and down around the fire and over and back again it was all the time. She had to stand away and even behind the old women the first mother said but she could still see.

She watched the rough man and the others but most of all the rough man and great father whose shoulders were broader than the stretch of a doorway. He sat in the middle. They said he had loved the second mother and not the first. There he was like an oak tree with his back to her and his bushy hair. She saw his eyes a few times like the strong spear of sunlight down through leaves in the deepest part of the wood. He had turned to search her out. But it wasn't a smile, his face fell down like a piece of earth on a river bank caving into the water, and he turned away. She hadn't even time to know if he had seen her or the look that was filled with as much love as she knew she could ever give to such a great father, so tall a man such a slender great tree with roots deeper than the very old man said was the deep lake on the mountain going into the earth, and branches higher and broader than the top of the mountain reaching the sky always. Why had he looked that — look?

She stood with the old women stirring the water that they made her stir on a small fire. Never before had she been like this so left away to herself with so many half thoughts and the questions.

She wanted to leave and go to where the second mother would be in the corner, or away into the wood forever. But where? And to what person? If such a place was nowhere —

Again no sky, no ground as well. Only the black bird, its wings, no tree or tiny beast that she had often tripped on and touched in the wood, or sound, or breeze —

Until the water touched her hand and she heard the old women cackling beside her like fat geese at the well, and they were all around and the men and the other women — there around too but different from before.

It was the first time she knew her own fear to give it a colour and a taste in her mouth.

Just then there was a silence. They had all stopped. The girl looked up and they were all standing back and the hush was like when bees

blocked out the sun in the middle of day. The light around was very low at the tree tops. Over from where the horses were put beyond the huts the second mother was coming driving on her cow. The red beast was spotted on its head and haunches, its sides were hollow and its grey udder hung like a dried leather bag between its hind legs. The second mother walking beside it mumbled the only sounds. Her hair was on her face and behind her it stood out on her head like the rough grey black thread of the battle shirts. Her sagging breasts were bare where her long brown covering was torn as far as the cord that tied it at her waist. She had thrown off covering from her feet. The girl looked around at amazed faces, she could see fear too. With one black hand at her forehead and one on the beast's back the huddling mother guided it around the fire and out past all the people where they made a way for her into the trees. As she passed near the girl it seemed her head turned to show two lines of water on the black sunken cheeks and the girl heard the word "Kinnrua" — the name!

She was long gone before anybody spoke or moved. The rough man stood first and looked every way around him without a sound. Then his shoulders were pulled back and he groaned a great sound and they were all afraid. He groaned again louder so that there was an echo of it like the fall of a heavy tree far away. It seemed the deepness of the earth had spoken out. He looked at the very old man still at the fire. And then he looked all around at woman and man and child and over at last to the girl. Such a look it was then that out of ages and deepnesses the look pierced so that no thing would touch it no space would hold it nor was there ever time when it began or ended.

The first mother had come behind the girl and she told her to stand still. Only the first mother would have dared to move after such a sound from the rough man. With the woman's voice near there was nothing of the girl could disobey even when the cord was loosed around her waist and the garment she was wearing fell from her shoulders down around her and to her feet. She stood terrified by their eyes. Now the first mother was cutting at her hair, cutting all of it that remained with a knife down until the girl felt the coldness of the blade on her head. Still she stood nor did the others move the slightest. Over her head the first mother was holding something, the pleats, the same feel of it at her forehead as in the hut before where they sewed all the days. Down on her face it was thick and in the blackness the girl shuddered — — great blackness wings spread.

Other women were helping the first mother but only she tied the cord and she straightened down the pleats, hundreds of them it seemed to the girl. They had sewn them now she was wearing them. The girl kept watching the quick flicks of these long hands, this tall thin woman with the thin voice and the thin and faded heart. Then the others were coming in a line with small cloths — a piece for the head, the arms, a piece for the neck and for the feet, each of them with a piece that had to be put on her. Some looked into her face with hollow white eyes as they came, others looked down as if they dared do nothing else and others still hid themselves behind their neighbours to hand what they carried to the first mother. As if teasing straw for a rope the first mother put each piece in place until they had all come and moved back again. What it was the girl didn't know. The rough man was tall and red among the rest their strange faces towards her holding her there. She was hungry almost to weakness, she was afraid so that she was shaking even though she was hot in the cloth. By then the green light of the fading day was only at the lowest trees and farther above in a

circle lay a darker colour with its great number of white sparks over them all.

The rough man came to her then. His face was bright the way it always was but his eyes held another look. He had loved the second mother the girl knew and he had loved herself his only child, she knew that too from the great eyes, but — — Why, she wanted to ask — why was it all.

"We will go together" he said very quietly.

"Where?"

"To where you will never be a minute without happiness.

"Is it for always?"

"Yes.

"With you — — with the second mother where she has gone is that why she has gone, is that — —? But why have they been doing this to me?" The girl could hardly stop the heaping up of the questions now.

The people were still standing back from them in silence. She only saw what seemed dark bushes. He was standing with her. But the rough man was uneasy, he looked away from her eyes and he told her that her questions would all be answered. He had touched her face and put his hand on her shoulder to lead her. She turned and walked with him wherever it was to be, past the very old man first whose face was very very old now in all its shadows, it was a stone face the girl said to herself, it had never moved in stories never wagged a white beard nor had the creased hands below ever raised themselves, it was always a stone that she had never seen until that moment. They were passing the people who were still like bushes and always were. And the first mother, but she was a weasel and the burning green eyes followed them as they went — woman without child. With the rough man she going on the way she had seen the man ride in that morning, back through the trees leaving the others all behind and she wondered where. Soon she was forgetting.

She wasn't tired but she was warm with all she wore and he let her rest when she wanted. Her eyes gradually began to see different shades and shapes in the blackness. He told her stories and answered none of her questions by going to the next story as they walked over dead branches and avoided bushes and went in and out of lighter and darker patches between all sizes of trees. He knew the way well and she felt happy with him. Maybe it was to meet the second mother and go with her. She thought of the animals and their bodies quivering in the night, she thought of the leaves that moved on the trees and the ferns and bracken and moss on small and big stones, she thought of the sky that was spread with the living fire of the great beasts body all amongst it. They were climbing now and the trees were farther apart. It was still the night. They were above the trees and out spreading itself all over was the sky of lights. The black shadows of other places were down and a great distance away. Up still the rough man lead her sometimes holding her hand sometimes carrying her and then letting her walk on her own beside him on the bumpy soft ground. It was a very long night the girl thought.

There was still part of the mountain to be climbed, she could see its dark shape ahead, but now the ground was level and they had stopped in the darker shadow of something big and strange, there wasn't even a breeze anymore. The rough man was silent. His hand on her shoulder motioned her to sit. There were stones and as she became used to the place she could see shapes as if the stones were built together — a house. Was the

ANOTHER ACHIEVEMENT FOR LEITRIM ---- IN SLIGO



Another Achievement for Leitrim - in Sligo

Mr Tony Hayden, Chairman, Leitrim Peoples Assoc. in Sligo, congratulating Pat McLoughlin a prominent member of the Association on being elected Mayor of Sligo. Also included are; Seated l. to r. Mrs M. Higgins, Michael Higgins, G. Murray and James Foran. Standing l. to r. Brendan Eames, J. Higgins, Pat Keany, Roger Eames, Michael O'Rourke, J. McLoughlin and P. Tiernan.

Pat McLoughlin was born at Fivemilebourne, Dromahaire, one of a family of eight. He is a brother of Joe McLoughlin, T.D. Sligo-Leitrim and father of Tony McLoughlin who was elected to Sligo Co. Council in 1974.

Photo: Jim Eccles

second mother here? To live here always. Always happy that was what the rough man had said.

Now there was yellow light over at the edge of the sky all round. Small dark birds were swooping low over the ground and their sounds were swift and singing. But the colours hadn't come back to anything else except the sky.

The rough man was standing very still like a shadow with his back to her. Just for one moment he was terrified that he had passed and left only a dead thing there. She remembered her hunger gain. The two thoughts clashed together as he turned. She could hardly see his face, what she saw was falling away, all the mountainside in thunder and rain. His voice was slow but it was soft.

He spoke as he had spoken to her before the people. All her questions were silent except one.

"You will never be unhappy lovely child."

He knelt to put his arms around her. Behind him the light was coming stronger and there was dark red in his hair again and brighter yellow behind the mountain top. The question burst fearfully from her.

"Why are you shaking?" She could see his fear. He spoke as if he hadn't heard.

"Long red hair in the wind that's what you'll have and horses, fast strong horses and young, white like — you remember the white that — in the cold — —"

The yellow light was now on the stones — it was the house of stone, built — His arms were tighter, the strength around at her shoulders, her face was under his bearded chin pressed, neck pressed —

"And you will have music and —"

Deeper against his chest it was tighter, tight —

— too tight until — Not anything except the wings spread down, all was crushing to blackness. And — pieces were falling and falling into the sky.

There was a sound of the wind in different places — breezes in clumps of the dried heather that now had the light of the rising sun on them. The rough man looked where her head lay, the head band had fallen back and the cropped hair gleamed in the light. She looked a child. This child — — —

His roar moved along against the mountain top as if echoed in a thousand tunnels. His raised head caught it and sent it back again, then again and again time into time.

Now they would know the terror that they had put upon him. And they too would be in terror — ever —

Now that they would say no more cattle would die. Now that they would say milk would not sour nor winter cold harm — nor anything ever — nor — nor — beauty — of mortal child — — Ever

He lay beside her until the sun stood in the middle of the sky. When he rose he knew what he must do.

He carried the body to the stone house that they had built and laid it there in the centre. He sat outside the doorway until the last light of the sun was darkening over the green and grey hills. Then he took the three stones that the very old man had told them to lay there and with the straw rope he himself had left he tied the stones on top of the body. Stones and body he carried slowly up the last hill to the top, sometimes crawling sometimes dragging until he got there. She would be dirty with clay but in the dark he could not see, nor did he want to, and if the cloth was torn what matter.

He banished thoughts. Each stone resting on

her was heavy and up near the sky the wind blew more. On the top there was only strong grass and then over a short distance the lake was silver under the weak moon. When he came to the water he gathered strength, turned slightly and then threw the body out as far as he could manage. In the water she would forget. There was a shadow and then a sound and after that only the water stilling itself as he turned away. He would not forget here. Nor would they — ever. And the earth shook with his oath of fear.

After four days they came to look for him. When they reached the stone house of the dead under the mountain top they were amazed and frightened at what they found. The second mother was cold and stiff beside the doorway. Inside lying in the centre was the red cow and beside her a full strong looking calf that had been slaughtered — From nowhere — like the child and the woman herself?

The rough man would never return to them now. They knew that. The very old man said they would have to leave that place and never turn head to look in its direction ever again. It was all that was to be done.

So it happened that they went across the river, and then over the valley through the grey hills nearer the sea. After that their numbers got fewer, they didn't prosper. But in whispers at night they might sometimes talk about the place which they never looked towards, and in fear of the woman and the girl they always called it by the name it has to this day — the hill of the cow, Bembo.

Even when the young ones of them became very old it remained a fearful place in their thoughts and they said they would every Samhain hear the whole earth shake with the roar of the rough man there.