

Finella: Book I

*The washer woman sits beside the
burn o' Castle Green, and wrings out
a cloth of gold.*

*The water runs heart-blood red and
woe to him whose death the
Bean-nighe has so foretold.*

When Kenneth the Second, son of Malcolm, was made King of Scotland, he sought to change the ancient laws of the land. No matter to him, that his own father, cousin to King Contantin, came into his Kingship the old way, the king's son being too young to

rule. Kenneth would not have the throne return to the family of his cousins. Whilst a boy-child of the King's blood lived, Kenneth would see him rule, whether still at the nurse's breast or half-buried in the grave. So King Kenneth did decree that the throne must be handed from father to son for all posterity.

In the old county of Kincardine, lived that ancient race of Alba that had endured the coming of the Romans, and the Celtic Priests, and the Vikings. The steadfast people of the Mearns wed and bled under the just eyes of their chief, the Mormaer, as

they always had. They thought little of the King, who had not the ruling of their lives, but followed their good chief and kept to the old ways. The chief's wife, Finella was her name, was the daughter of the chief of neighboring Angus. A good lady she was to the people of the Mearns, the equal of her husband, fierce and just and true. Lady Finella was wise in the knowledge of her ancestors, that special woman's lore that survives in the remote places where the priests fear to tread.

This good woman had a single son, a youth hot of blood and keen to prove

himself worthy of his station. But there were those about him that would take advantage of his youth. These men held no close regard for the King and his new laws, but were powerful and cunning, and caused many a conflict among the high houses. And so it was that Crathilinthus, young son of Finella, was called to trial before the King for fomenting rebellion and sundry other crimes. Wary of the King's justice, the youth took to the hills to seek safe harbor among the men who should have shared his guilt. But they knew too well the King's love of retribution, and an example must be made, so

they offered up the boy and their crimes were forgiven.

The good Lady Finella, at her home in Castle Green, received assurances that she might trust to the King's grace for forgiveness of her son's youthful errors and misplaced pride. That the King would, no doubt, hold the young man captive for some small time, and treat him with the courtesy due his station, so that ever after the youth and his people would be the King's most loyal subjects. But a King's wrath may overtake his grace.

Great, then, was the good lady's shock when news of her son's execution came with his shirt, dipped in his heart's blood. She wept nought, and moaned but little, and appeared before all to regret the King's disfavor more than the loss of her only son. The messenger who had borne the news of her son's pitiful death, she sent speedily back to beg the King's attendance at a feast, whereat a marvel she would unveil. She decked out the royal bower in Castle Green in silks and embroidery and ordered cooks and servants alike to prepare the keep for a royal visit.

On a crisp autumn day, King Kenneth rode forth into the Mearns, his royal retinue arrayed for sport. He sped full fast across the Howe to tarry not amongst the common people lest their warrior-like mien and devotion to their chief overwhelm their proper sense of obedience. To lead the King to the hunting hill where great herds stream down from the north, the good Lady Finella sent her best horsemen, with servants and dogs. She sent also a message that as the King is lord of all, he must bring down his forest rival, a proud stag of sixteen tines that had never yet been wounded. She would make all ready

at the Castle, to serve him and his men, upon their great and natural success. With this message, she gifted the king a lock of her raven hair to tuck against his breast so that the wild wolves and boars would know her favor and be at peace.

While the King hunted, the lady prepared. In the great hall, before each place, the lady placed casques of mead, and ale, and wine, more than any man might drink and remain upon his feet. Dancers and acrobats vied for place with musicians and minstrels, and every beautiful child that could be found was dressed for

serving. When all was set, the Lady away to her garden went to check upon the marvel her invitation had promised. Through the hedges and a gate which none but her might spy, she passed out of the castle bounds and hied to a small stone cottage hidden amongst a great stand of trees. The windows were dark, covered by the thick furs of mountain beasts, but through the cracks between door and wall, a merry golden light glimmered and danced. Within, the walls were dressed in clothes of gold and silver all entwined with embroidered flowers. Pearls and gems winked in the fire lights like

dew drops glistening in the morning sun. But the marvel given pride of place in the middle of the room, so carefully crafted and at great expense, was the statue of a youth, cunningly wrought in overlapping plates of gold. The noble youth, it seemed, waited only the breath of life to be full animate. He held up, as if fresh-picked, an apple of darkest obsidian stone and waited only the King to pluck it from his hand. It was well a marvel worth a King's visit.

The hunters returned triumphant, the King himself having cut out the stag's warm heart. The hall was loud with

merriment and feasting, and Lady Finella sat at the King's right hand and served him sweetbreads from her own platter. Her husband, the good Mormaer, sat with the King's men and those of his own that had gone on the hunt and told tales of great prowess and strength. The pretty children set to serve, under Finella's instructions, rushed to fill every glass that dropped beneath half-full. The entertainers danced and sang, and no soul but Finella's paid attention to ought else. Merry and loud was the hall that night, and few thought of the missing chair where

once a noble youth, sole heir of the house, had held his youthly court.

With bellies full, and blood on fire, no King's men noticed the good Lady Finella rise from her seat. Her arms she draped about the King's neck, and closely learned her face next his. Her warm breath tickled the fine hairs of his beard as she whispered of pleasure into his ear.

“Away with me, dear King, you must now slip. A marvel I have promised you, a pleasure all men desire but few behold. Come away now, or my

husband jealous in his claims, may seek your desires to prevent.”

Like ghosts they passed unnoticed from the hall. She led him through the garden, autumn frost and moonlight marking their way. Through the gate and to the forest all was silent, until upon the threshold of the secret cottage, the lady paused. Her voice, as if a maid's, quivered as she bade him enter and behold the marvel prepared for his pleasure alone.

It was with some surprise that King Kenneth saw that Finella followed him nought into the room, but stood

smiling in the doorway, the moonlight
a veil upon her dark hair. But as he
turned, all thoughts of her flew,
transfixed was his gaze upon the
golden youth. So real the boy looked,
as if newly dipped in gold, and the
King thought himself familiar with the
fine cast of his face and the haughty
fire of his eye. He circled the statue,
one, twice, and thrice, and thought no
King had ever finer a gift.

*“My lady Finella, you have spoken
true. A great marvel this youth is, and
great is the love your house and mine
must share. But, good lady, I swear it
hits me strange, this face all decked*

in gold I seem to know. A servant, perhaps, in my own retinue? What youth have you so enlisted to imprint upon the sculptor's art?"

"My good King, keen eyes you have. This face has indeed served you, and you have served him, though not as you might assume. Tonight's feast was for his sake made, so that a mother's grace may be paid where all respect is due. Take you the apple in his frozen hand, and receive the honor and love that is your holy right."

The lady's love and his right to claim, the King reached for the black apple sparkling from the youth's golden hand. Upon his touch, the apple toppled to the floor, and the golden plates so cleverly designed as the mouth of the golden youth, opened wide with a great groaning of gears. From its great cavernous maw, an arrow shot forth. The King's cheek it pierced, his scream a gurgling sound. As more plates opened and arrows hissed forth, he looked for aid where he could have found none. Lady Finella, watching from outside the door, beheld the fine golden form of her murdered son repay the King's

justice. The smile the King had found so enticing never wavered from her fair face as she watched his honor bleed from a hundred small wounds. His body slumped at the feet of the clockwork marvel, and three times the raven crowed.

Who knows the hour of Lady Finella's triumph, but so late it was when she stirred again from the door that the King's men had noticed his absence and could be heard searching in the woods. With a last look at the lovely grisly scene, she tossed her cloak about her head and ran for a hill she had marked during the day. It was a

spot many feared to tread, for it had once been a site of great power, when the old ways had ruled and the priests held no sway. Here, as if a demon spirit did her bidding, awaited a horse fleet of foot and black of coat. It stamped its feet, and breathed great plumes of frosted breath into the night sky. Lady Finella leapt upon its back and turned the demon horse to face the forest, with its secret cottage and dead king. The baying of dogs, the cry of men, the flickering of torches told her that the marvel had been discovered. Soon they would come, a mother's head to place upon

the block, a mother's love to bleed
out upon the stones.

Speed away, good Finella, spur your
horse on! The night cloaks your
escape, the land bids you gone!