

Finella: Book II

Upon the back of a horse as dark as midnight, her black hair a banner streaming behind, good Finella flew down the hill and across burn and glen, the crime of a mother's revenge to escape. The autumn ferns and frost-rimed foliage paid homage to their lady and hushed the thundering hooves of her fleet beast. To Fettercairn first, she went, to warn her people of the tempest she called forth upon their lands.

Like a jewel cradled in the breasts of a great queen, the home lights of Fettercairn twinkled out from the wooded valley of the Howe. Poor and rich, of stone and of mud, each home's hearth flamed all night with the Mormaer's wood to guard against the bitter cold and the wandering spirits of those long gone. Three

houses she visited, and thrice she knocked upon each door. Thrice she was greeted by the sleepy voices of surprise, thrice the animals baying were hushed, and thrice she was offered shelter against the King's hunters. But no harm would lady Finella bring to the miller, the soldier, and the farmer. No risk would she pass on to mothers and their simple sons. A word of warning only, a blessing shared, and a last farewell for their Lady of the Mearns.

The hunting men, with torches high, sought her high and low. The people so forewarned stood without their homes, night dress hiding the weapons and coins stowed about their bodies. They said not one word and lifted not one hand to help or hinder the royal avengers. The King's men found no trace of their quarry and so their anger grew. Into each home, a torch was thrown, and

Fettercairn blazed with the fury of a King's revenge. Yet, the people stood by and did not cry or beg, but watched as it burned and blessed the smoke that might hide the Lady's tracks.

Across fields lately mowed, and burns running beneath ice, Lady Finella fled the burning Howe. She crossed the old Roman road where once Agricola had sent his conquering hordes to languish among the hills and harry the ancient people of the Mearns. Like those cairn builders and stone worshippers before her, Finella cared not for the ambitions of foreign men and spat upon the quarried stone that Roman pride had made.

The witches' hour came and passed but Night would not abandon her favourite daughter in her hour of need. Late did the Night battle

against day and the slow the sun was to rise.
And though the sun with piercing eye might
easily reveal the dark lady's form streaking
across hill and dale, he turned away content
to doze in his bower of mist and fog. And so
good Finella, the murderess most blessed,
was marked not as she climbed the Hill of
Garvock.

She climbed to the top of an old
moss-covered cairn, a few more yards to gain
an eagle's view. But still the bed curtains of
mist which had so soothed the sun into a
dozy sleep lay heavily upon the hill.

She could not see her castle home,
nor blackened town from whence she fled.

She could not see the baying hounds
nor the men who rode to take a traitor's head

All below her should spread the Mearns,

but happed in mist it stayed.
Oh Lady Finella, still hurry your step
and let no thing beget delay.

The good lady's horse, having ridden fast and hard as if a demon prodded its feet, could no longer maintain its glorious speed. Its sides were foamed with sweat and froth, its hooves matted with mud. To cool the beast and a rest to take, she led the horse down to the lochs below the hill. A priest had once come to bequeath them a name from his great books of saints and men, but the people knew the lochs belonged not to the childe James, but to the kelpie and bean-nighe. Here among the spirits of her country, Finella sought rest and respite. She bathed her arms in the cold mountain water and loosed the horse to drink.

But the priests had done their job too well,
and the spirits had abandoned the sacred

waters, for in not but a minute she could hear the baying of the hunters' dogs and yelling of men fast in bloodsport. Bridle and cloak she left upon the shore, and kicked the horse back into a galloping run. Past the well of healing waters she flew, down into the burn where her tired horse fought for footing amongst the moss-covered stones. But with the hounds baying nearby, her scent she must hide, so down the tricky burn she rode.

Two miles of water and stone she passed, until the dogs and the shouting of men could be heard no longer. To the sea she might go to find some boat to carry her far from her native shore and the laws of Kings and men. Yet, if she kept this path scent or no, would not the hunters' guess her plan and meet her before safe harbour could be found? A diversion, a trick, might compensate the delay, if to a different harbor she might direct

the hunters. So from her path she turned northeast and sought a place to hide.

In olden times, long before the rule of christian men and long before the tread of roman soldiers, the Mearns sheltered the people of sky and stone who worshipped the turning of seasons and the small gods of the forest. Some say giants came to terrify the peaceful farmers and the gods of the forest turned them into stone. Some say it was the druids themselves who changed to rock upon a moonlit night so better to guard the land. Some say the faeries danced and stones grew great to mark the land so gay. Here on Cloch hill among the resting stones Finella hid, a place no christian man would go for great was the spirit of the ancients in this hallowed hollow. Here, she rested beneath a stone, and gathered strength from its embrace.

Poor Finella did not know that the King's men were of no faith but the sword and coin and feared nothing of spirits and the dead. Finella woke to the sounds of a shrieking horse. Her midnight beast had wandered down hill and found himself surrounded by the armored men whose hands he fought to evade. The mighty horse, true warrior of the Mearns, kicked and bucked and bit and screamed, so that they did not see the lady slip from the stone's shadow to race down another path.

She ran and ran, back to the burn that whose icy waters would lead her to the sea. Her feet scraped raw by rock and bush bled freely in the stream and still she ran. But the water was too cold and her skin too thin a comfort: her feet felt not the water passing, felt not their tread on stone, and felt not the hole into which she stumbled. Biting her tongue so as

not to cry out, Finella crawled upon the banks, dragging her numb feet behind her to leave a path like some snake-like beast.

In the heavy-wooded glen, she could hear the water roar and smelled the salt of the sea: not so far to go, the good lady thought. She pulled herself up the branches of a young oak, a view of freedom sought she. But as she did, she heard again the howling of the dogs and the yelling of the men. They burst through hedges and woods, with raised swords and gleaming mace, and at once gathered round her tree. Quickly, she scrambled up to the top and threw herself from one branch to another. So dense the forest grew, the tree arms entwined like lovers, she seemed to fly across the very tops. The men upon the ground, through close-pressed shrubs pressed on, her path below to follow.

Over the curses of the men and howling of the dogs, Finella could hear the raging waters, the sea cliffs she thought to find. Yet poor Finella came to the forest edge and saw not the safety of the sea, but rather a deep ravine with a waterfall. So tired she was, so bruised and so battered, her desire had deceived her senses; for now she smelt no fine sea air and heard no waves crash in. The men gathered at the waterfall edge and waited for her to come down the tree. Some cursed, some prayed, some offered her courtesy. They would take her to trial, if she came down now, that she might her case plead and seek the small mercy of a quick death and burial by her son's body.

Oh Finella, what mercy would they have you
crave

Whose forgiveness should you seek

Your child's murderer lays cold in his grave
Your mother's fate you must meet

The good lady listened not to the cries of the men, nor to their curses and oaths. She prayed instead to the old gods, to the night, to the raven, to the moon. And she jumped from the top of the tree down into the roaring waterfall.

Some say she flew away, others that her body was washed out to sea. Some say she transformed into a fish, and others that the devil took her away to hell. But the men found not her body, and not a word was heard again. No one knows where Finella went, the woman who murdered a King for the love of her son.

Perhaps she lives still, guarded by the old gods and the people of the Mearns.

