

The Crimes of Lady Fowlis

By E. Lynn Linton

Nobler names come next upon the records. Katherine Roiss, Lady Fowlis, and her stepson, Hector Munro, were tried on the 22nd of June, 1590, for “witchcraft, incantation, sorcery, and poisoning.” Two people were in the lady’s way: Margery Campbell the young lady of Balnagown, wife to George Roiss or Ross of Balnagown, Lady Katherine’s brother; and Robert Munro her stepson, the present baron of Fowlis, and brother to the Hector Munro above mentioned. If these two persons were dead, then George Ross could marry the young Lady Fowlis, to the pecuniary advantage of himself and the family. Hector’s quarrel was on his own account, and was with George Munro of Obisdale, Lady Katherine’s eldest son. The charges against the Lady Katherine were, the unlawful making of two pictures or images of clay, representing the young lady of Balnagown and Robert Munro, which pictures two notorious witches, Christian Boss and Marioune M’Alester, *alias* Loskie Loncart, set up in a chamber and shot at with elf arrows—ancient spear or arrow-heads, found in Scotland and Ireland, and of great account in all matters of witchcraft. But the images of clay were not broken by the arrow-heads, for all that they shot eight times at them, and twelve times on a subsequent trial, and thus the spell was destroyed for the moment; but Loskie Loncart had orders to make more, which she did with a will. After this the lady and her two confederates brewed a stoup or pailful of poison in the barn at Drumnyne, which was to be sent to Robert Munro. The pail leaked and the poison ran out, except a very small quantity which an unfortunate page belonging to the lady tasted, and “lay continewallie thaireftir poysonit with the liquour.” Again, another “pig” or jar of poison was prepared; this time of double strength—the brewer thereof that old sinner, Loskie Loncart, who had a hand in every evil pie made. This was sent to the young laird by the hands of Lady Katherine’s foster-mother; but she broke the “pig” by the way, and, like the page, tasting the contents, paid the penalty of her curiosity with her life. The poison was of such a virulent nature that nor cow nor sheep would touch the grass whereon it fell; and soon the herbage withered away in fearful memorial of that deed of guilt. She was more successful in her attempts on the young Lady Balnagown. Her “dittay” sets forth that the poor girl, tasting of her sister-in-law’s infernal potions, contracted an incurable disease, the pain and anguish she suffered revolting even the wretch who administered the poison, Catherine Niven, who “scunnerit (revolted) with it sae meikle, that she said it was the sairest and maist cruel sight that ever she saw.” But she did not die. Youth and life were strong in her, and conquered even malice and poison—conquered even the fiendish determination of the lady, “that she would do, by all kind of means, wherever it might be had, of God in heaven, or the devil in hell, for the destruction and down-putting of Marjory Campbell.” Nothing daunted, the lady sent far and wide, and now openly, for various poisons; consulting with “Egyptians” and notorious witches as to what would best “suit the complexion” of her victims, and whether the ratsbane, which was a favourite medicine with her, should be administered in eggs, broth, or cabbage. She paid many sums, too, for clay images, and elf arrows wherewith to shoot at them, and her wickedness at last grew too patent for even her exalted rank to overshadow. She was arrested and arraigned, but the private prosecutor

was Hector Munro, who was soon to change his place of advocate for that of “pannel;” and the jury was composed of the Fowlis dependents. So she was acquitted; though many of her creatures had previously been convicted and burnt on the same charges as those now made against her; notably Cristiane Roiss, who, confessing to the clay image and the elf arrows, was quietly burnt for the same.

Hector Munro’s trial was of a somewhat different character. His stepmother does not seem to have had much confidence in mere sorcery: she put her faith in facts rather than in incantations, and preferred drugs to charms: but Hector was more superstitious and more cowardly too. In 1588, he had communed with three notorious witches for the recovery of his elder brother, Robert; and the witches had “pollit the hair of Robert Munro, and plet the naillis of his fingeris and taes;” but Robert had died in spite of these charms, and now Hector was the chief man of his family. Parings of nails, clippings of hair, water wherein enchanted stones had been laid, black Pater-Nosters, banned plaids and cloths, were all of as much potency in his mind as the “ratoun poysoun” so dear to the lady; and the method of his intended murder rested on such means as these. They made a goodly pair between them, and embodied a fair proportion of the intelligence and morality of the time. After a small piece of preliminary sorcery, undertaken with his fostermother, Cristiane Neill Dayzell, and Mariaoune M’Ingareach, “one of the most notorious and rank witches of the country,” it was pronounced that Hector, who was sick, would not recover, unless the principal man of his blood should suffer for him. This was found to be none other than George Munro, of Obisdale, Lady Katherine’s eldest son whose life must be given that Hector’s might be redeemed. George, then, must die; not by poison but by sorcery; and the first step to be taken was to secure his presence by Hector’s bedside. “Sewin poistes” or messengers did the invalid impatiently send to him; and when he came at last, Hector said never a word to him, after his surly “Better now that you have come,” in answer to his half-brother’s unsuspecting “How’s a wi ye?” but sat for a full hour with his left hand in George’s right, working the first spell in silence, according to the directions of his foster-mother and the witch. That night, an hour after midnight, the two women went to a “piece of ground lying between two manors,” and there made a grave of Hector’s length, near to the sea-flood. A few nights after this—and it was January, too—Hector, wrapped in blankets, was carried out of his sick bed, and laid in this grave; he, his foster-mother, and M’Ingareach all silent as death, until Cristiane should have gotten speech with their master, the devil. The sods were then laid over the laird, and the witch M’Ingareach sat down by him, while Cristiane Dayzell, with a young boy in her hand, ran the breadth of nine rigs or furrows, coming back to the grave, to ask the witch “who was her choice.” M’Ingareach, prompted of course by the devil, answered that “Mr. Hector was her choice to live and his brother George to die for him.” This ceremony was repeated thrice, and then they all returned silently to the house, Mr. Hector carried in his blankets as before. The strangest thing of all was that Mr. Hector was not killed by the ceremony.

Hector Munro was now convinced that everything possible had been done, and that his half-brother must perforce be his sacrifice. In his gratitude he made M’Ingareach keeper of his sheep, and so uplifted her that the common people durst not oppose her for their lives. It was the public talk that he favoured her “gif she had been his own wife;” and once he kept her out of the way “at his own charges,” when she was cited to appear before the court to answer to the crime of witchcraft. But in spite of the tremendous

evidence against him, Hector got clear off, as his stepmother had done before him, and we hear no more of the Fowlis follies and the Fowlis crimes. Nothing but their rank and the fear of the low people saved them. Slighter crimes than theirs, and on more slender evidence, had been sufficient cause for condemnation ere now; and Lady Katherine's poisonings, and Hector Munro's incantations, would have met with the fate the one at least deserved, save for the power and aid of clanship.