

FERRET: The Reluctant King

By L.K. Samuels

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Ferret paced back and forth in the dark cell. He stopped, reached for the wall, dug his fingers into wooden poles and squeezed. He knew the wood was too thick to break with his hands. But that did not really matter. He knew he would never see the real criminals face an iota of justice. No, the murderers would never be convicted and executed in front of a cackling crowd. That place of honor was reserved for himself alone.

“*Droch-chrioch ort!*” he swore in Gaelic under his breath. He gazed at his rawhide hands and age spots. He was old and worn out. His body drooped with a weariness that kept sinking into hopelessness. He feared he had little energy left to fight the pigheads of authority. And why should he? The world was devoid of justice. There were no innocents, no beloved God; only the evil and cruelty that fed upon the flesh of the meek. Fight for what? That was a good laugh.

Feeling queasy, he pressed his cheek against the rough bark and closed his eyes. He let out a feral growl deep in his throat and banged his head against one of the thicker poles. Why had he been so stubborn and foolhardy? There was no way out; his fate was sealed tighter than a tomb chamber. He knew he should have gone deeper into the hinterland, far away from those who delighted in calling themselves civilized. He was a bona fide fool. That was without doubt.

Ferret heard a commotion outside of his small cell. It sounded like a brood of squawking hens scurrying from a red fox. He found a narrow gap between the lashed pinewood poles and pressed his face close to the wall. Squinting, he caught sight of the fort’s courtyard. There they were—a whole regiment of the King’s men, British regulars cleaning their shiny bayonets. Standing next to them, a pocket of officers milled about the fort like cattle—probably the dreaded Sixth Regiment of Foot—the same murderers who had been responsible for destroying his people. It gave him some comfort to know that they would surely be first in line to burn in Hell.

Ferret twisted around and peered into the darkness. He knew his day of reckoning was coming. That was not so surprising. He had excelled at making

enemies. In fact, he took pride in it. Why not be judged by the enemies one had made? That was his golden rule. And as he reckoned it, his half-witted antics had made him slightly more popular than an overflowing piss pot.

Ferret steepled his fingers together and slouched against the wall. If only he had moved on, settled somewhere in the Mississippi River Valley, or put down roots in New Orleans with the French. That was what a smart fellow would have done. But no, he got caught inside a web of deception. Should have known better.

The jail door flew open. A hulking man with dark stubble on his face stood at the entrance, blocking the sun. Ferret backed away and groped around for a possible weapon. Finding none, he fingered his long grey hair and cocked his head to the side. Sure, he could accommodate an uninvited guest. Back against the wall, he wiped his sweaty hands on his black-stained deerskin shirt. He had been a man of some girth before months of prison gruel. Yet, he thought he still had enough grit to break a few bones. Let them come hither. He was ready for them, and for all the other knaves who curried favor with the English dogs.

“Ya have an important engagement. And it ain’t with the King!” The big-gutted jailer let out a belly laugh, pulled out a club from his buckskin breeches and took aim.

“Go to *Halifax*! I am an Irish king!”

“Why ya bloody hang-dog, I’ll—”

In a burst of energy, the jailer rushed the old man, pinned him against the wall and struck him on the head. He dragged Ferret outside into the bright sunlight, next to a water barrel. A sentry grabbed the dipper and splashed cold water across the prisoner’s face. Ferret got up on one knee, then the other, teeth clenched, right fist balled up. As he slowly stood, his lips stretched into a wide defiant grimace that ignited a tirade of profanities from his newly found enemy. That was exactly what Ferret wanted—the more cursing, the more gratifying.

Ferret beckoned the man to step closer and try again. With the speed of a charging bull, the brute rushed forward, wielding his club. Ferret blocked his assault and sent the man plummeting to the ground. The man got up and charged Ferret again. After exchanging a few hard swings, Ferret rammed his elbow into the jailer’s face. It had little effect. Another blow sent the jailer reeling backwards, crashing into a squad of armed soldiers.

Ferret reached down and picked up a handful of dirt. He let his fingers enjoy the warmth of the soil before letting it sift out of his hands. With a sense of pride, he brushed the dirt off his hand and nodded. The fray had been pretty one-sided, mostly in his favor. He found it a rather enjoyable spectacle for a man of his age.

The jailer stood, dazed and flustered. He spat blood and chipped teeth. Wrenched with pain, he pointed his stubby finger at the prisoner. “Why ya slimy weasel. I’ll show ya who’s in charge.”

“The name’s Ferret. But I will answer to ‘your grace’ if you prefer.” Moving back inside the cell, Ferret braced himself into a corner, beaming with the fervor of a wild-eyed man. He knew how to fight the big boys; all Irishmen did.

“Better come out or I’ll have your head spiked.”

Ferret shook his head. He had taken a liking to his puny cell. It was uncrowded, and the roaches scurrying across the floor were far better company than any Englishman. The jailer stroked his fleshy chin and eyed the prisoner apprehensively.

Ferret tugged on his beard, imitating the jailer.

“Why ya goat-sucking bastard!” The jailer lunged at Ferret, swinging with his right fist. Much quicker, Ferret blocked the punch and hurled himself at the jailer like a hell-bound daredevil. They tumbled to the dirt floor amid a choking blanket of dust. The jailer picked himself up, growled, and prepared to throw another punch. Too late. Ferret grabbed the man’s shirt collar, rammed him against the pinewood poles, and bit off a piece of his ear. Screaming and clutching the side of his head, the jailer ran outside. Chewing his morsel, Ferret soon found the texture too rubbery for his taste and spat it out.

The jailer screamed, “He bit me ear! He’s a bloody weasel! That’s what he is!”

More men, British regulars with tomahawks strapped to their belts, surged into the cell. They lashed at Ferret like a nest of rattlesnakes. One clung to his body, trying to hold him down, while another beat him with a club. Ferret buckled under their weight.

The redcoats bound the prisoner’s hands, dragged him outside, face down in the ground, and backed away. They appeared none too pleased to have a go with a man possessed by demons.

Lightheaded and bruised, Ferret attempted to stand. Instead he slumped to his knees, fell head-first to the ground, rolled over, and stared up at the sky. He cursed the broiling sun, but its bright light blinded him with the fury of a scorned woman. For a moment he wondered if even nature was conspiring against him, but smarting pain came from his hands. The bloody rope had been tied too tightly, cutting off the flow of blood. It was an odd sensation: the sun was hot and yet his sweating flesh tingled with the sting of ice. He struggled to loosen the ropes but failed. There was nothing he could do. They were digging deep into his flesh, numbing his fingers and hands. Might lose a finger or two, if he lived that long. Soon his whole body would be cold as stone.

Regaining his strength, Ferret tried again to stand. When he got to his feet, he looked up and glanced at the sun with defiant triumph. Nobody would ever outshine him. He thought back to how Indians treated the mentally deranged. They would avoid anyone they suspected of having the falling sickness. Seen it happen with the Cherokee. Heathens feared crazy men; they would flee in holy terror because they believed madness was contagious. He was beginning to think they were right. He worked up a mouthful of spit

blinked his eyes rapidly, and frothed with a bemused smile, feigning the illness. Might work.

“Get a-moving!” A runty soldier shoved Ferret forward, ignoring his antic. “And do not think you can befool me. You’re surely the devil incarnated.” Another redcoat clenched the old man’s hands and pulled him toward a scaffold.

Ferret limped ahead. He could barely see: his left eye was swollen; his right eye was coated with clumps of dirt. Still, he could sense a multitude of people closing in, gathering about, ready to mock him and scourge him. He could see fuzzy outlines and silhouettes shifting all about him. Then he heard cackling geese, hissing, squabbling, and honking. But they were not geese; they were human voices, hundreds of commonfolk, chattering at each other for no good reason.

He squinted and focused on a gaggle of stupid, gawking faces. They were staring at him; hundreds of colonists, pushing and shoving, mostly Virginian farmers clad in rough leather, beaver hats, and tall boots, along with a sprinkling of black-capped Dutch traders puffing on long pipes. Farther away, blackamoor slaves gazed from behind their masters, while black and white children raced in circles, chasing dogs or playing hot cockles. He silently watched the menagerie and dreamt of better times.

Dreaming. It was the only nice thing about life. Did not cost one penny. He could just sit back and fantasize about a peaceful Ireland of green pasturelands, quiet landscapes, big-hearted gentlefolk, honest kindred and a carefree life of plenty. It was the perfect daydream. But that’s all it was, just a hollow dreamfest. The real Eire had died long before he had been born.

Breathing in deeply, Ferret eyed the gallows. Behind it was the poorly built main barracks of Fort James, Virginia, surrounded by tall, spiked walls, to ward off Indian attacks. To his left was the main gate, standing wide open but jammed with busybody colonists and trigger-itchy soldiers. He tried to get a better view of the gate. It was the only way out of the fort, his only chance if he wanted to find a way to escape.

Jeering with glee, several young colonists moved closer and poked long willow sticks at Ferret. He lurched at them and growled. He had bitten one ear off already. He wondered if Virginian fingers might taste a mite better. He would never find out; they all moved back.

To Ferret’s right, three British drummers began rattling their pigskins in unison. It was a ploy to torment and annoy him. They had done it to Irishmen for centuries. He wanted to put his hands over his ears to block out the horrible racket, but his tightly bound ropes had other plans. Instead, he flashed the drummers an evil eye.

“Halt!” An English officer stood in front of the scaffold stairs. He scowled at the prisoner, then smirked. “Fine day for a hanging!”

“Tis a splendid day indeed,” Ferret said. He popped a lopsided smile. “I for one shall enjoy every second of it. Wouldn’t want you to miss it, me laddie. But if you feel faint-hearted, just look the other way. I’ll understand.”

The officer’s face flushed red. “Get this buffoon under the gallows.”

Suddenly, a black-robed man confronted Ferret. It was Judge Locke, the man who had sentenced him to death. Locke clamped his hands over the prisoner’s for a long time, as if they were about to pray together.

“I am sorry,” the judge said softly. “The Lord will look after you. I will see to it.”

“Ha!” Ferret looked straight into the magistrate’s eyes. He prepared a special volley of spit just for this vile blackguard, then he saw a soldier lift the butt of his flintlock. He swallowed the spit.

“Remember,” Locke said as he continued to clasp the prisoner’s hand, “the Lord works in miraculous ways.”

Ferret’s face lowered. What was the judge jabbering about? Judge Locke would live and he would die. Nothing very miraculous about that.

“Get climbing!” a soldier commanded.

Ferret broke free of the judge and shambled to the makeshift, pine-hewn stairway that led up to the gallows. A hemp noose swayed in the morning breeze. He leaned against the railing and noticed how rickety it was. He would never have allowed such a weak railing in his kingdom.

Ferret trained his eyes on the hooded executioner, who kept scratching his forearms. It was hard to fathom—all of this lavish proceeding and fuss over the likes of one Irishman. Some might be flattered. It was not every day that the English allotted such expense for a hoary vagabond. Usually they just shot Irishmen in the back, tossed a few rocks to mark the body and were done with it.

“Move along,” a soldier growled as he shoved Ferret with his flintlock.

Ferret scowled at his British tormentors. There was something odious and repulsive about English ways and their ill-begotten traditions. So formal, prissy and clean—even their brass buttons were shiny and spotless. But there was more to these men than fancy garments; more than collarless redcoats with yellow lapels and cuffs; more than silly-looking grenadier hats that peaked above the head like a mountain, or pig-tail queues that swung like an old plow horse’s tail. These were men of hollow conscience, willing to obey orders without considering their consequences; these were the same sort of men who ruled Eire with an iron fist and hot lead. He remembered watching a Brit bayonet an Irish woman from Macroom because her blood pudding was rancid. The soldier had treated the woman like a poke of raw potatoes. That was who they were—soulless men who killed strangers because they were under orders from afar. To the English, murdering strangers was mere duty. The Irish were different. Clan fought clan to satisfy justice, not to exterminate those they disliked.

“Come on, now! Move!” the soldier ordered.

Ferret remained deep in thought. Eire . . . Eire . . . Eire. His father had been murdered in his homeland by the same army of cutthroats. It happened near Macroom. Had to be the worst day of his pitiful life.

“We don’t have all bloody day!” The soldier shoved Ferret in the back, causing him to fall to his knees.

“Criminy! See here!” a Scottish colonist shouted. “He’s an old man. Show respect for age. Could his crime warrant such ill treatment?” The colonist slipped his smoking pipe into his wide belt. “What did he do anyway?”

The soldiers ignored the question.

Swiftly, two soldiers came up from the rear, grabbed Ferret, and dragged him up the steps. They dumped him on the scaffold, underneath the noose.

“Who did ja murder?” one man yelled. The question rippled through the crowd.

An old, thin woman pushed her way in front of the crowd. She rasped, “Listen to me! This prisoner be falsely accused.”

“Shut up!” a portly colonist bellowed with scornful contempt.

A tall, well-dressed black man in white sleeves confronted the fat colonist. “Sir, I would refrain from interrupting. ’Twould be most unhealthful.” The black man raised his arm and displayed a massive fist. The fat colonist quickly turned silent.

The old woman, facing the scaffold, shouted again. She tried to catch the prisoner’s eye. “Hear me, prisoner! The Lord will keep you from harm’s way.”

Ferret, still lying on the floor of the gallows, peered over the edge. The woman acted as if she knew him. *Who is she?* She looked familiar, mighty familiar. But all his companions and kindred were long ago dead and buried. The men without consciences had massacred them. This enraged him to the point where he wanted to set the entire world ablaze with fire and brimstone. To him, everyone deserved to be jabbed by Satan’s pitchfork for all eternity.

“The Lord protects those who protect themselves,” the old woman shouted as she squeezed through the tightly packed crowd, struggling to get closer.

Who is she? She seemed so boisterous and saucy. Her shrill voice pricked like a thorn. But her gray hair ceded to a few streaks of wavy red, like . . . Ferret shook his head in disbelief. Not possible. His wife had died decades ago in a fiery pit of burning hell. Still, this woman spoke with a beautiful Irish brogue like his beloved Heather. He wanted to reach out and touch her hair and see for himself. But he knew his hands were too tightly bound. The British had made sure of that. They were always so prim and proper.

However, shifting his body to gain a better look at the agitated woman, he discovered that the rope had become loose, as though it had become undone all by itself selves. That was a silly notion. Ferret pulled against the rope and it began to give way. How was this possible? It had been tighter than catgut on a fiddle. The rope had been cut. Impossible! The only person who had touched his bindings was Judge Locke. But before he could break free entirely, the

executioner loomed closer and pulled out a black hood. Ferret looked up. The task was at hand. Darkness would soon fall. The old woman yelled something again, but her words were lost among the clamor of the crowd. He squinted at her and wondered if it could really be Heather. Then he noticed her eyes. They had the same fiery look of . . .

Ferret fought back tears as he turned his attention to the rope. The executioner was breathing down his neck. Ferret watched him reach for the noose to test its strength.

Ferret knew that he had to think fast. He had to buy more time.

Major Mountjoy, a tall, skeletally thin officer, climbed up the scaffold with a number of high-ranking officers. He strolled over to Ferret. He turned to one of his men, perturbed. "What is the prisoner doing on the floor?"

The soldier smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "Must have fallen, sir!"

"Well, get him up! This is an official hanging, not a drunken alehouse."

The soldier rushed over and carefully lifted Ferret to his feet. The gentleness surprised Ferret, convincing him that such a man might entertain a favor.

"Could I confer with that woman down below?" Ferret whispered, trying to point out the woman with his bound hands. "There must be something I can do to make it worth your while."

The soldier grinned. "Not possible. But when you get to where you're going, I'm sure there'll be plenty of women to chatter your ear right off."

The executioner stood next to Ferret and looped the noose loosely around Ferret's neck.

Mountjoy breathed deeply, pushed away a few strands of hair from his forehead and tidied up his uniform. He inched over to the scaffold's edge and began to address the gathering crowd. "Hear ye, hear ye! Charges against the prisoner will be read forthwith." He stepped aside to allow his superior officer to read the formal charges.

As the youthful General Williams walked to the scaffold's edge, he glanced back at Mountjoy. Williams was a recent arrival from London, sent to investigate reports of insurrection. He was eager to impress the older officers. Despite a smallpox-scarred face, he appeared healthy. He rearranged his white wig and carefully broke open the wax seal on a roll of parchment.

"I once hanged a twelve-year-old pickpocket," Williams said, trying to amuse Mountjoy. "Hanging the bloody ragamuffin did wonders for the township. It made everyone think twice before pinching an apple."

Mountjoy nodded respectfully. "I'm sure everyone will enjoy this hanging, General."

"Of course they will." Williams cleared his throat, lifted up the document and began to read. "His majesty, King George II, hereby grants the authority to local magistrates of the Commonwealth of Virginia to render a decision concerning charges of treason against one Sean O'Neill, also known as Ferret."

"Ferret?" the crowd roared.

The uproar halted Williams's reading. He watched the crowd with bewilderment.

"Ferret's been dead for years," a Dutchman cried out. "Murdered by Injuns. Whole township burned by savages."

"Nay, nay!" the old woman shouted. "All lies to cover the truth. King Ferret fought redcoats, not Indians."

Williams turned to Mountjoy, confused, soured-faced. "I had expected an enthusiastic crowd of loyal subjects of the King. This is quite insufferable. What is going on here?"

"Well . . . ahh . . ." Mountjoy stuttered with quick breaths. "That trial . . . Well, you see, we felt obligated to hold it in secret. Nobody was to know. We felt it was critical to do it that way. We could not let the populace know beforehand that this Ferret fellow was still alive. Besides, almost nobody should have known about the hanging."

"Then you should not have announced the hanging," exclaimed Williams.

"Sir! We had to post a few notices. English law and all that," Mountjoy said apologetically. "We dare not infringe on the King's laws. The risk is too great. The commonfolk bicker about everything we do here, and they have the power, or should I say the black-powder, to do something about it. Still, I was ordered to make an example of someone in Virginia."

Williams frowned. "Why didn't you hang a local man?"

"Sir!" Mountjoy nervously rubbed his clean-shaven face. "Perhaps you do not fully comprehend the situation here. We're no longer in the Old World. We cannot antagonize local Virginians. To do so would risk open rebellion. 'Tis a regular hornets' nest." Mountjoy paused, looked over his shoulder and lowering his voice. "Do you realize that there have been three uprisings since Bacon's rebellion? They've attempted to boot out the Royal Governor more times than I can count."

The crowd pressed closer to the scaffold. They were quickly shoved back by a row of redcoats. That provoked a chorus of jeers.

Mountjoy wiped his forehead. "They burned Jamestown to ashes over some silly argument. I chose Ferret because he had recently been captured. I thought he was unknown in these parts. I was apparently mistaken."

Williams took a quick glance at the ugly crowd, then turned back to Mountjoy. "My report will not be complimentary."

"With all due respect, sir. Who cares about your bloody report? We might not leave here alive. Every colonist is armed and a dead shot."

"My God, they are still Englishmen."

"They are wild men of the forest. Little better than feral bastards. They owe no allegiance to anybody."

"Nonetheless," Williams declared, "I still proceed whether they listen or not." He stomped his foot to get the crowd's attention as he read. "The court, in the year of Our Lord 1748, has rendered a verdict in accordance with the laws of England and Virginia's House of Burgesses. The charge is treason against

the authority of the Crown and Parliament. The verdict is 'guilty as charged.'" He looked up from his document and glared. "Punishment will be carried out immediately. To be hanged by the neck 'til dead!"

Ferret bowed slightly and smiled. The crowd cheered the prisoner's disregard for authority. Mountjoy backed up a few inches, as if he were searching for a place to retreat.

A one-armed man, thin and frail, approached the stairway, accompanied by several redcoats. He wore a tattered white wig and an outdated officer's uniform. He trembled as he climbed the steps. With a hoarse voice he said, "Hang the cur and be done with it." His words were unheard by the crowd, but the old man continued to curse the prisoner. He hobbled up to Ferret and poked his cane at the prisoner's belly.

"You old skull, Ferret said. "Worms ought to be burrowing through your head." He was unimpressed that Cromwell had lived so long. He knew from first-hand experience that evil often outlived good.

"Let the worms starve," the major general whined in a high-pitched voice. He waved his armless stub in the air. The scar across his face was red from exertion. "I shall enjoy sweet vengeance at long last."

"Sorry to disappoint," Ferret said. "The world's a hollow wilderness, and I stand here deprived."

"What?" The Cromwell coughed, sniffed harshly, turned and spat into the crowd below. "Well, I will enjoy it nevertheless." He rubbed his neck and looked up to the heavens. "Oh Lord, castigate this man for his hideous crimes."

"Crimes?" Ferret snarled. "'Tis the likes of you who take delight in watching flowers wilt and children die."

Enraged, the old general knocked the wooden tip off his cane, exposing a long spike, and jabbed Ferret in the thigh. The crowd roared and surged up against the scaffold like a wave. Dozens of red-coated soldiers forced them back.

"This be British justice?" a Scottish colonist screamed.

Mountjoy marched up to Cromwell, grabbed him around the waist and pulled him away. "Sir," the major whispered in Cromwell's ear, "you may jab him all you like after he is properly hanged. But not sooner. We must follow the rules."

Cromwell feigned remorse. "Aye, we mustn't forget the cursed rules!"

Blood streamed from Ferret's leg. He snarled in pain and shook his thigh.

Williams squinted at the old general and shouted, "Who is this man? I was under the impression that I was in charge of this execution. I demand to know what he is doing here!"

"Becalm yourself, general," Mountjoy said. "That's Major-General Cromwell. He commanded the military forces below the Carolinas. His gallantry led to the defeat of the Yamasee uprising thirty years ago."

"Then he has no business here."

“Sir!” Cromwell gasped. “I was an exemplary commander and a decorated war hero. I would be careful as to what I say in public.”

Williams noticed a soldier bandaging Ferret’s wound and kicked him out of the way. “There is no need for that. We will proceed with the hanging. And if anyone interferes with this lawful execution, each offender will spend a fortnight in the stockades on water and roaches. Have I made myself clear?”

The executioner walked behind Ferret, unfolded a black hood and prepared to slip it over his head. The unruly crowd began to throw spoiled fruit and rocks.

Suddenly, a shiny object landed at the prisoner’s feet. Ferret glanced down. It was a dagger. Ferret looked around guardedly, realizing that a conspiracy was afoot. Could be a dirty hoax. Surely someone was preparing to shoot him if he tried to escape. Old trick. But that made no sense. He’d be stone dead either way.

From past experience, Ferret knew that opportunities were always short-lived. He had to move fast and think about the mystery later. He broke the rope around his wrists and ducked out from under the noose. He lunged at the executioner, knocking him off the scaffold, and scooped up the dagger. He wielded it in a defense posture, pointing the blade at the startled soldiers.

Williams motioned to the guards to capture Ferret, but he was too late. Dagger in hand, Ferret jumped Mountjoy, and clamped him in an arm-lock. He swung Mountjoy around before the soldiers could fire, tickling the major’s throat with the blade’s keen edge.

“Easy now!” Ferret warned with a lift of his brow. “I’ve got a reputable hostage. I would hate to see damaged goods.”

The gawking soldiers stood frozen in silence, not moving a muscle.

“Stand down!” Ferret barked.

The redcoats slowly lowered their flintlocks.

“Now be so kind as to pull back,” Ferret demanded. “Or so help me God I’ll carve him up like a turnip.”

“’Tis another conspiracy brewing,” Cromwell half-sobbed. “My God, don’t let him escape, again. Not again!” With a sniff of defeat, the general hobbled to the stairway, stopped, turned, and glared at his longtime nemesis; finally, he retreated from the scaffold.

“Look here, my good fellow,” Williams said without thinking; “You must surrender.”

“Why?”

“Well. ’Tis the King’s law. And the King . . .”

“King! I was once a fine king,” Ferret boasted, fingering the tarnished knife. It was no ordinary dagger. It resembled the one he had found as a child before the battle of Macroom, just hours before his father was captured by Cromwell’s henchmen. He tried to block those memories, but they came flooding in without mercy—the dying villagers, the blazing fire, the never-ending clashes. He had lost his world, bereft of everything but a river of tears.

Ferret: The Reluctant King

He thought he had buried them for good. Now it looked as if he would have to relive them once again.

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