

# The Eve of St. John

By Sir Walter Scott

*Smaylho'me, or Smallholm Tower, the scene of the following Ballad, is situated on the northern boundary of Roxburghshire, among a cluster of wild rocks, called Sandiknow-Crags, the property of Hugh Scott, Esq. of Harden. The tower is a high square building, surrounded by an outer wall, now ruinous. The circuit of the outer court being defended, on three sides, by a precipice and morass, is only accessible from the west, by a steep and rocky path. The apartments, as usual, in a Border Keep, or fortress, are placed one above another, and communicate by a narrow stair; on the roof are two bartizans, or platforms, for defence or pleasure. The inner door of the tower is wood, the outer an iron grate; the distance between them being nine fret, the thickness, namely, of the wall. From the elevated situation of Smaylho'me Tower, it is seen many miles in every direction. Among the crags by which it is surrounded, one more eminent is called the Watchfold, and is said to have been the station of a beacon in the times of war with England. Without the tower-court is a ruined Chapel.*

The Baron of Smaylho'me rose with day,  
He spurr'd his courser on,  
Without stop or stay, down the rocky way,  
That leads to Brotherstone.

He went not with the bold Buccleuch,  
His banner broad to rear;  
He went not 'gainst the English yew,  
To lift the Scottish spear.

Yet his plate-jack<sup>1</sup> was braced, and his helmet was laced,  
And his vaunt-brace of proof he wore:  
At his saddle-gerthe was a good steel sperthe,  
Full ten pound weight and more.

The Baron returned in three days' space,  
And his looks were sad and sour;  
And weary was his courser's pace,  
As he reach'd his rocky tower.

He came not from where Ancram Moor<sup>2</sup>  
Ran red with English blood;  
Where the Douglas true, and the bold Buccleuch,  
'Gainst keen Lord Evers stood.

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<sup>1</sup> The plate-jack is coat armour; the vaunt brace (Vant-bras), armour for the shoulders and arms; the sperth, a battle-axe.

<sup>2</sup> A.D. 1555, was the battle of Ancram Moor, in which Archibald Douglas Earl of Angus, and Sir Walter Scott of Buccleuch, routed a superior English army, under Lord Ralph Ivers, and Sir Brian Latoun.

Yet was his helmet hack'd and hew'd  
His action pierced and tore,  
His axe and his dagger with blood imbrued,—  
But it was not English gore.

He lighted at the Chapellage,  
He held him close and still;  
And he whistled thrice for his little foot-page,  
His name was English Will.

—“Come thou hither, my little foot-page,  
“Come hither to my knee;  
“Though thou art young and tender of age,  
“I think thou art true to me.

“Come, tell me all that thou hast seen,  
“And look thou tell me true!  
“Since I from Smaylho'me tower have been,  
“What did thy Lady do?”—

—“My lady, each night, sought the lonely light,  
“That burns on the wild Watchfold;  
“For, from height to height, the beacons bright  
“Of the English foemen told.

“The bitter clamour'd from the moss,  
“The wind blew loud and shrill;  
“Yet the craggy pathway she did cross,  
“To the eiry<sup>3</sup> Beacon Hill.

“I watch'd her steps, and silent came  
“Where she sat her on a stone;—  
“No watchman stood by the dreary flame,  
“It burned all alone.

“The second night I kept her in sight,  
“Till to the fire she came;  
“And, by Mary's might, an armed knight  
“Stood by the lonely flame.

“And many a word that warlike lord  
“Did speak to my lady there;  
“But the rain fell fast, and loud blew the blast,  
“And I heard not what they were.

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<sup>3</sup> *Eiry* is a Scotch expression signifying the feeling inspired by the dread of apparitions.

“The third night there the sky was fair,  
“And the mountain-blast was still,  
“As again I watch’d the secret pair,  
“On the lonesome Beacon Hill.

“And I heard her name the midnight hour,  
“And name this holy eve;  
“And say, ‘Come this night to thy lady’s bower;  
“Ask no bold Baron’s leave.

“He lifts his spear with the bold Buccleuch;  
“His Lady is alone;  
“The door she’ll undo, to her knight so true,  
“On the eve of good St. John.”—

—“I cannot come; I must not come;  
“I dare not come to thee;  
“On the eve of St. John I must wander alone:  
“In thy bower I may not be.”—

—“Now, out on thee, faint-hearted knight!  
“Thou shouldst not say me nay;  
“For the eve is sweet, and when lovers meet,  
“Is worth the whole summer’s day.

—“And I’ll chain the blood-hound, and the warder shall not sound,  
“And rushes shall be strew’d on the stair;  
“So, by the black rood-stone,<sup>4</sup> and by holy St. John,  
“I conjure thee, my love, to be there

—“Though the blood-hound be mute, and the rush beneath my foot,  
“And the warder his bugle should not blow,  
“Yet there sleepeth a priest in a chamber to the east,  
“And my footstep he would know.”—

—“O fear not the priest who sleepeth to the east!  
“For to Dryburgh<sup>5</sup> the way he has ta’en;  
“And there to say mass, till three days do pass,  
“For the soul of a knight that is slayne.”—

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<sup>4</sup> The Black rood of Melrose was a crucifix of black marble, and of superior sanctity.

<sup>5</sup> Dryburgh Abbey is beautifully situated on the banks of the Tweed. After its dissolution it became the property of the Haliburtons of Newmains, and is now the seat of the Right Honourable the Earl of Buchan.

“He turn’d him around and grimly he frown’d;  
“Then he laughed right scornfully—  
“He who says the mass-rite, for the soul of that knight,  
“May as well say mass for me.

—“At the lone midnight hour, when bad spirits have power,  
“In thy chamber will I be.”—  
“With that he was gone, and my Lady left alone,  
“And no more did I see.”

Then changed I trow, was that bold Baron’s brow,  
From the dark to the blood-red high;  
—“Now, tell me the mien of the knight thou hast seen,  
“For by Mary, he shall die!”—

—“His arms shone full bright, in the beacon’s red light:  
“His plume it was scarlet and blue;  
“On his shield was a hound, in a silver leash bound,  
“And his crest was a branch of the yew.”—

—“Thou liest, thou liest, thou little foot-page,  
“Loud dost thou lie to me;  
“For that knight is cold, and low laid in the mould,  
“All under the Eildon<sup>6</sup> tree.”—

—“Yet hear but my word, my noble lord,  
“For I heard her name his name;  
“And that Lady bright she called the knight  
“Sir Richard of Coldinghame.”—

The bold Baron’s brow then changed, I trow,  
From high blood-red to pale—  
—“The grave is deep and dark, and the corpse is stiff and stark;  
“So I may not trust thy tale.

“Where fair Tweed flows round holy Melrose,  
“And Eildon slopes to the plain,  
“Full three nights ago, by some secret foe,  
“That gallant knight was slain.

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<sup>6</sup> Eildon is a high hill, terminating in three conical summits, immediately above the town of Melrose, where are the admired ruins of a magnificent monastery. Eildon tree was said to be the spot where Thomas the Rhymer uttered his prophecies.

“The varying light deceived thy sight,  
“And the wild winds drown’d the name;  
“For the Dryburgh bells ring, and the white monks they sing,  
“For Sir Richard of Coldinghame.”—

He pass’d the court-gate, and he oped the tower-grate,  
And he mounted the narrow stair,  
To the bartizan-seat, where, with maids that on her wait,  
He found his Lady fair.

That Lady sat in mournful mood  
Look’d over hill and vale;  
Over Tweed’s fair flood, and Mertoun’s wood,  
And all down Teviotdale.

—“Now hail! now hail! thou Lady bright!”—  
—“Now hail! thou Baron true!  
“What news, what news, from Ancram fight?  
“What news from the bold Buccleuch?”—

—“The Ancram Moor is red with gore,  
“For many a Southern fell;  
“And Buccleuch has charged us, evermore,  
“To watch our beacons well.”—

The Lady blush’d red, but nothing she said:  
Nor added the Baron a word:  
Then she stepp’d down the stair to her chamber fair,  
And so did her moody lord.

In sleep the Lady mourn’d, and the Baron toss’d and turn’d,  
And oft to himself he said,—  
—“The worms around him creep, and his bloody grave is deep,  
“It cannot give up the dead.”—

It was near the ringing of matin bell,  
The night was well nigh done,  
When a heavy sleep on that Baron fell,  
On the eve of good St. John.

The Lady look’d through the chamber fair,  
By the light of a dying flame;  
And she was aware of a knight stood there,  
Sir Richard of Coldinghame.

—“Alas! Away! away!”—she cried,  
“For the holy Virgin’s sake!”—  
—“Lady, I know who sleeps by thy side;  
“But, Lady, he will not awake.

“By Eildon-tree, for long nights three,  
“In bloody grave have I lain;  
“The mass and the death-prayer are said for me,  
“But, Lady, they are said in vain.

“By the Baron’s brand, near Tweed’s fair strand,  
“Most foully slain, I fell;  
“And my restless sprite on the beacon height,  
“For a space is doomed to dwell.

“At our trysting-place,<sup>7</sup> for a certain space,  
“I must wander to and fro;  
“But I had not had power to come to thy bower,  
“Had’st thou not conjured me so.”—

Love master’d fear—her brow she cross’d;  
—“How, Richard, hast thou sped?  
“And art thou saved, or art thou lost?”—  
The vision shook his head!

—“Who spilleth life, shall forfeit life;  
“So bid thy Lord believe:  
“That lawless love is guilt above;  
“This awful sign receive.”—

He laid his left palm on an oaken beam;  
His right upon her hand:  
The Lady shrunk, and fainting sunk,  
For the touch was fiery warm.<sup>8</sup>

The sable score, of fingers four,  
Remains on that board impress’d,  
And for evermore that Lady wore  
A covering on her wrist.

There is a nun in Melrose bower,  
Ne’er looks upon the sun;  
There is a monk in Dryburgh tower  
He speaketh word to none.

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<sup>7</sup> *Trysting-place*, Scottish for *rendezvous*.

<sup>8</sup> Later versions changed this line to read “For it scorch’d like a fiery brand.”

That nun, who ne'er beholds the day,  
That monk, who speaks to none,  
That nun was Smaylho'me's Lady gay,  
That monk the bold Baron.