

Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)

1 *The Elden Tree: An Ancient Ballad*

A feast was spread in the baron's hall,
And loud was the merry sound,
As minstrels played at lady's call,
And the cup went sparkling round.

For gentle dames sat there, I trow, 5
By men of mickle might,
And many a chief with dark red-brow,
And many a burly knight.

Each had fought in war's grim ranks, 10
And some on the surgy sea,
And some on Jordan's sacred banks,
For the cause of Christentie.

But who thinks now of blood or strife, 15
Or Moorish or Paynim foe?
Their eyes beam bright with social life,
And their hearts with kindness glow.

"Gramercie Chieftain, on thy tale!
"It smacks of thy merry mood." —
"Ay, monks are sly, and women frail,
"Since rock and mountain stood." 20

"Fy, fy! sir knight, thy tongue is keen,
"Tis sharper than thy steel." —
"So, gentle lady, are thine eyen,
"As we poor lovers feel."

“Come, pledge me well, my lady gay, 25
“Come, pledge me, noble frere;
“Each cheerful mate on such a day,
“Is friend or mistress dear.”

And louder still comes jeer and boast,
As the flagons faster pour, 30
Till song, and tale, and laugh are lost,
In a wildly mingled roar.

Ay, certes, 'tis an hour of glee,
For the baron himself doth smile,
And nods his head right cheerily, 35
And quaffs his cup the while.

What recks he now of midnight fear,
Or the night wind's dismal moan?
As it tosses the boughs of that Elden Tree,
Which he thinketh so oft upon? 40

Long years have past since a deed was done,
By its doer only seen,
And there lives not a man beneath the sun,
Who wotteth that deed hath been.

So gay was he, so gay were all, 45
They mark'd not the growing gloom;
Nor wist they how the dark'ning hall,
Lower'd like the close of doom.

Dull grew the goblet's sheen, and grim
The features of every guest, 50
And colourless banners aloft hung dim,
Like the clouds of the drizzly west.

Hath time pass'd then so swift of pace?
Is this the twilight grey?
A flash of light pass'd through the place, 55
Like the glaring noon of day.

Fierce glanced the momentary blaze
O'er all the gallant train,
And each visage pale, with dazzled gaze,
Was seen and lost again. 60

And the thunder's rolling peal, from far,
Then on and onward drew,
And varied its sound like the broil of war,
And loud and louder grew.

Still glares the lightning blue and pale, 65
And roars th' astounding din;
And rattle the windows with bickering hail,
And the rafters ring within.

And cowering hounds the board beneath
Are howling with piteous moan, 70
While lords and dames sit still as death,
And words are utter'd none.

At length in the waning tempest's fall,
As light from the welkin broke,
A frighten'd man rush'd through the hall, 75
And words to the baron spoke.

"The thunder hath stricken your tree so fair,
"Its roots on green-sward lie," —
"What tree?" — "The Elden planted there
"Some thirty years gone by." 80

“And wherefore starest thou on me so,
“With a face so ghastly wild?” —
“White bones are found in the mould below,
“Like the bones of a stripling child.”

Pale he became as the shrouded dead, 85
And his eye-balls fix'd as stone;
And down on his bosom dropp'd his head,
And he utter'd a stifled groan.

Then from the board, each guest amazed,
Sprang up, and curiously 90
Upon his sudden misery gazed,
And wonder'd what might be.

Out spoke the ancient seneschal,
“I pray you stand apart,
“Both gentle dames and nobles all, 95
“This grief is at his heart.

“Go, call St. Cuthbert's monk with speed,
“And let him be quickly shriven,
“And fetch ye a leech for his body's need,
“To dight him for earth or heaven.” 100

“No, fetch me a priest,” the baron said,
In a voice that seem'd utter'd with pain;
And he shudder'd and shrank as he faintly bade
His noble guests remain.

“Heaven's eye each secret deed doth scan, 105
“Heaven's justice all should fear:
“What I confess to the holy man,
“Both heaven and you shall hear.”

And soon St. Cuthbert's monk stood by
 With visage sad, but sweet, 110
And cast on the baron a piteous eye,
 And the baron knelt low at his feet.

"O Father! I have done a deed
 "Which God alone did know;
"A brother's blood these hands have shed, 115
 "With many a fiend-like blow:

"For fiends lent strength like a powerful charm,
 "And my youthful breast impell'd,
"And I laugh'd to see beneath my arm
 "The sickly stripling quell'd. 120

"A mattock from its pit I took,
 "Dug deep for the Elden Tree,
"And I tempted the youth therein to look
 "Some curious sight to see.

"The woodmen to their meal were gone, 125
 "And ere they return'd again,
"I had planted that tree with my strength alone,
 "O'er the body of the slain.

"Ah! gladly smiled my father then,
 "And seldom he smiled on me, 130
"When he heard that my skill, like the skill of men,
 "Had planted the Elden Tree.

"But where was his eldest son so dear,
 "Who nearest his heart had been?
"They sought him far, they sought him near, 135
 "But the boy no more was seen.

“And thus his life and lands he lost,
“And his father’s love beside;
“The thought that ever rankled most
“In this heart of secret pride. 140

“Ah! could the partial parent wot
“The cruel pang he gives,
“To the child neglected and forgot,
“Who under his cold eye lives!

“His elder rights did my envy move, 145
“These lands and their princely hall;
“But it was our father’s partial love,
“I envied him most of all.

“Now thirty years have o’er me past,
“And, to the eye of man, 150
“My lot was with the happy cast,
“My heart it could not scan.

“Oh! I have heard in the dead of night,
“My murther’d brother’s groan,
“And shudder’d, as the pale moon-light 155
“On the mangled body shone.

“My very miners pent in gloom,
“Whose toil my coffers stored,
“Who cursed belike their cheerless doom,
“Were happier than their lord. 160

“O holy man! my tale is told
“With pain, with tears, with shame;
“May penance hard, may alms of gold,
“Some ghostly favour claim?

“The knotted scourge shall drink my blood, 165
 “The earth my bed shall be,
“And bitter tears my daily food,
 “To earn heaven’s grace for me.”

Now, where that rueful deed was done
 Endow’d with rights and lands, 170
Its sharp spires bright’ning in the sun,
 A stately abbey stands.

And the meekest monk, whose life is there
 Still spent on bended knee,
Is he who built that abbey fair, 175
 And planted the Elden Tree.

1821

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