

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

9 *The Eve of St. John*

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, 5  
His banner broad to rear;  
He went not 'gainst the English yew,  
To lift the Scottish spear.

Yet his plate-jack was braced, and his helmet was laced,  
And his vaunt-brace of proof he wore; 10  
At his saddle-gerthe was a good steel sperthe,  
Full ten pound weight and more.

The Baron return'd in three days space,  
And his looks were sad and sour;  
And weary was his courser's pace, 15  
As he reach'd his rocky tower.

He came not from where Ancram Moor  
Ran red with English blood;  
Where the Douglas true, and the bold Buccleuch,  
'Gainst keen Lord Evers stood. 20

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

He lighted at the Chapellage, 25

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; 30  
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, 35  
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. 40

“The bittern clamour’d from the moss,  
The wind blew loud and shrill;  
Yet the craggy pathway she did cross  
To the eiry Beacon Hill.

“I watch’d her steps, and silent came 45  
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, 50  
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, 55

And I heard not what they were.

“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. 60

“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; 65  
His lady is all 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; 70  
On the eve of St. John I must wander alone:  
In thy bower I may not be.’ —

“Now, out on thee, fainthearted knight!  
Thou shouldst not say me nay;  
For the eve is sweet, and when lovers meet, 75  
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, and by holy St. John,  
I conjure thee, my love, to be there!’ — 80

“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 the chamber to the east,  
And my footstep he would know.’ —

“O fear not the priest, who sleepeth to the east! 85  
For to Dryburgh 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.’ —

“He turn’d him around, and grimly he frown’d;  
Then he laugh’d right scornfully — 90  
‘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, 95  
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!” — 100

“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, 105  
Loud dost thou lie to me!  
For that knight is cold, and low laid in the mould,  
All under the Eildon-tree.” —

“Yet hear but my word, my noble lord!  
For I heard her name his name; 110  
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 — 115  
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 gay gallant was slain. 120

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

He pass'd the court-gate, and he oped the tower-gate, 125  
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; 130  
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? 135  
What news from the bold Buccleuch?” —

“The Ancram Moor is red with gore,  
For many a southron fell;  
And Buccleuch has charged us, evermore,  
To watch our beacons well.” — 140

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,      145  
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 wellnigh done,      150  
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 —      155  
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.      160

“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,      165  
Most foully slain, I fell;  
And my restless sprite on the beacon's height,  
For a space is doom'd to dwell.

“At our trysting-place, for a certain space,  
I must wander to and fro;      170  
But I had not had power to come to thy bower,  
Had'st thou not conjured me so.” —

