

## The Great Seer of Fife.

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**S**IX centuries ago a royal barque sailed into a harbour in one of the Orkney Islands. It had come from Norway, whither several Scottish knights had hastened on the death of Alexander III. to bring home the young Queen Margaret, better known in history as the Maid of Norway, to occupy the vacant throne. Grief-stricken was the little party of Scotsmen, for the bloom of the tender flower was fading fast away ; and with her death there swept over the country such a blast as Scotland had never before known. From this dire confusion, however, she rose, thanks to the splendid military genius of Wallace and Bruce, to the most unexpected and extraordinary height of power. One member of that knightly band draws our fancy back to former times,

When Michael Scott, the famous Seer of Fife,  
Old women turn'd, how strange ! to hares and fauns,  
And woke the sleeping winds to shake broad fields  
Of golden grain.

A great mediæval scholar was Sir Michael Scott. Of his birth and parentage we know but very little—of his death not any more. All the reliable information that has been bequeathed to us regarding his early life is that he was born exactly a hundred years before the battle of Bannockburn—the year, by the way, in which William the Lion died. A Homer-like contention is still waged anent his birthplace. The diocese of Durham, the upper streams of the Tweed, and the kingdom of Fife all claim him as their own.

History tells us little or nothing either about his ancestry, yet his parents must have occupied an influential position among their contemporaries, for Michael's life was one of learning and travel and research from beginning to end. Very early he showed signs of the greatest ability, and, profiting by a liberal education, conducted by the ablest teachers the times could produce, he soon dipped deeply into the mysteries and speculations of European philosophy, rising rapidly by the extraordinary acuteness of his mental capabilities and the diligence of his study, till he was hailed and recognised as one of the most remarkable men of the world.

From time immemorial—in ages darksome and superstitious, as well as in the most enlightened—monarchs and rulers have extended much encouragement to men of science and learning. Witness, for instance, the honours showered upon the sages during the sway of the Ptolemies and the sovereigns of the East. Courts were open to the great scholars of the day, and kings and philosophers laid their heads together to solve scientific problems. The wonders of the firmament and atmospheric phenomena—weather changes, the striking beauty of the rainbow, the grandeur and nature of meteors, the majesticness of storms, the dread effects of electricity—have attracted the attention of mankind since the most ancient date, and astrologers and philosophers in all ages of the world's history have hastened to analyse and explain them. And while the explanation of these extraordinary wonders was perfectly obvious and intelligible to the initiated, it is not strange that men like Michael Scott should have been held in uncanny repute by the ignorant and superstitious people among whom they lived.

It was while the occult sciences were being encouraged that Sir Michael made a tour of Europe. The stock of knowledge obtainable in his native country he soon exhausted. Thereafter, repairing to the University of Oxford, then, as now, one of the great centres of learning, he pursued his studies with such honest zeal that in a short time he was master of the Latin and

Arabic languages, besides distinguishing himself in astrology and chemistry—the black art on which principally rests his fame as a seer. There was nothing he could not do ; nothing he could not tell. He possessed no scanty share of the true sciences ; was credited with an intimate acquaintance with the untrue. From Oxford he went to Paris, where he underwent a course of mathematics, in the acquisition of which he attained such a singular proficiency that his fellow-students styled him Michael the Mathematician. Yet there was no lull in his other studies—judicial astrology and occult chemistry he pursued as vigorously as ever. Before he left the Parisian Academy he had conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Theology ; and when he did leave it, it was only after he had made himself master of all that could be got out of it.

The Land of the Cæsars next claimed his attention, and all at once his fame blazed abroad. In the prosecution of his work he made Padua his headquarters, teaching and being taught in the most celebrated nursery of arts and learning in Italy, where trod in after years the hallowed feet of Galileo. Michael's genius still lives in that venerable spot. His essays on astrology gained him the most enthusiastic acclamations. It was at this time, too, that he commenced to publish those portentous predictions which astonished the people of that enlightened country and made his name be spoken of in whispers with reverence and awe in “ the remotest of the sea-encircled Hebrides.”

Thereafter Scott crossed the seas to Spain, and took up his residence in Toledo—“ the fountain-head of much of the wisdom of the time”—whose University was one of the greatest centres for the cultivation of the abstract sciences. Here he devoted himself to his favourite pursuits, interpreting phenomena, discovering causes, discerning and revealing the hidden springs of the universe ; eagerly, curiously, persistently interrogating and examining everything. He studied all things ;—Aristotle and animals, magic and medicine, chemistry and alchemy, necromancy and thought-reading—the black-art which was the trade-mark of

Toledo. Here, too, he translated from the Arabic into the Latin Aristotle's "History of Animals," comprising nineteen books in all.

Sovereigns and philosophers soon courted his acquaintance. Frederick II., King of Sicily, and afterwards Emperor of Germany, honoured him with his especial friendship, and invited him to his court, appointing him astrologer-royal, in which capacity Sir Michael translated for the king almost the whole of Aristotle's works. During his sojourn in Germany the famous Scotsman wrote his "Opinions of Astrologers"; an original work, called "Liber Introductorius Sive Indicia Quæstionum"; and a treatise entitled "Physiognomia et de Hominis Procreatione." On resigning his royal position he turned his attention to medicine as a profession, and such was his success that, in a comparatively short time, crowds of admirers from every quarter flocked to visit him, curious to behold the great doctor who could reveal to them the secrets of the future. When he bade farewell to Germany he told Frederick how, when, and where he should die, a prophecy which was fulfilled to the very letter.

Michael's fame and reputation reached this country before him, and no sooner did he set foot on English soil than he received an invitation from Edward I. to spend some time at the Saxon Court. When he arrived once more at Balwearie, from which he had been so long an absentee, Alexander III. was dead, and Sir Michael was deputed, along with Sir David Wemyss, also a Fife nobleman, to proceed to Norway for the grand-daughter of the deceased sovereign. He was an old man then—

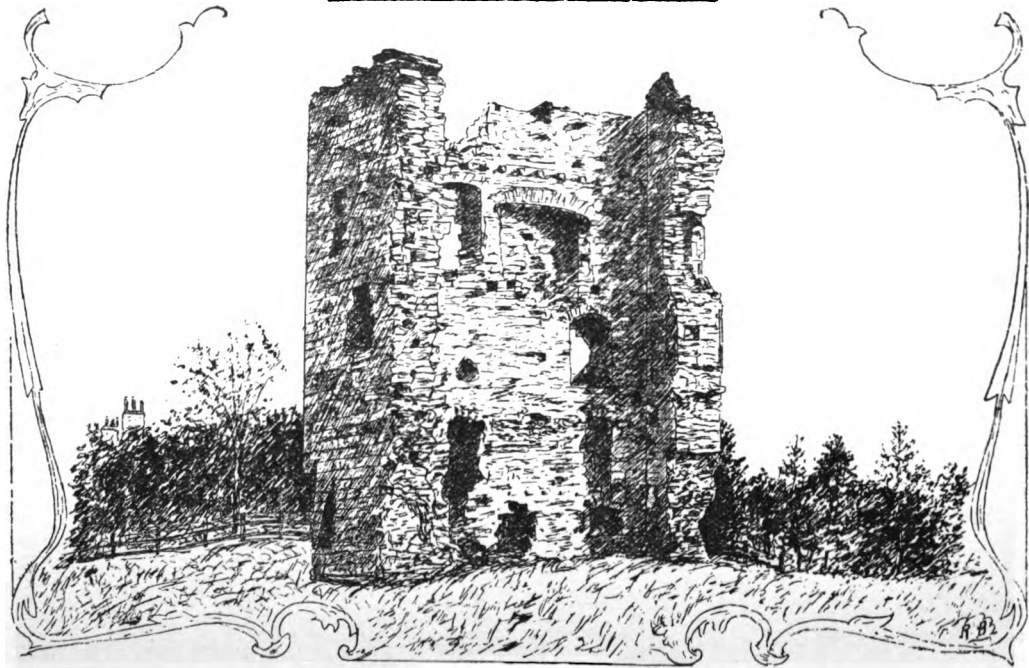
His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare.

That was in 1290, and two years later he died, as extraordinary a man as the world has ever seen; not a man whom his own generation alone stared and wondered at and called great, but a man whose memory is as fresh to-day as it was six hundred years ago.

The great bulk of the people stood in awe of him—a mysterious being they thought him, who could read their thoughts like a book. But the reason is not far to seek. He was a man miles ahead of an unenlightened age ; and ignorance, aided by its cousin rumour or popular report, is ever anxious and ready to distort and mystify the reputation of such a person, the more so in an age when superstition ranges about unfettered. Magic incantations and tales of philtres ; the mysteries of astrology and alchemy ; the absurd forebodings of evil, by perpetual reproductions ever green and fresh—these were the landmarks of his time.

As we gaze upon the old mouldering ruins of Balwearie Castle, standing desolately amid silver-weeded, dimpled hills and valleys, the weird-like stories about Sir Michael's miraculous powers come back to our minds. People say that Scott was not a Fifer,—they say he did not even live in Balwearie Castle,—the wizard was a myth. And yet round those ivied and nettled lonely walls there clings a spell of magical romance—and down every inch of that rough and toilsome brae which one must climb to reach the top breathes the legendary renown of the great scholar.

And Michael did not live here, did he not ? “ Is not this yawning valley, where winds for ever dwell, called the Wizard's Gap to this day, because the great magician's familiar demon created the breezy hollow by one superfluous blast from his invisibly capacious lungs ? Was it not down this very road that the same fiend, voracious for work, went, at his master's command, to make ropes of the sand that silts up Kirkcaldy Harbour ? And don't the town councillors wish he had succeeded ? Wasn't it from Balwearie's windows that the wizard looked down over the verdant lonely valley and saw the Tiel meandering on its way to the sea, in the teeth of an easterly haar no doubt, and prophesied that the day would come when these quiet solitudes would be broken by the noisy hoofs of an iron steed ? Hark ! the distant clamour of a passing train



BALWEARIE CASTLE.

fulfils the prophecy as it rumbles over the viaduct that spans the Tiel.

“Was it not from the gateway of Balwearie Castle that the wizard came forth to dole alms to the wandering beggars, whom woe betide if they whined the shibboleth ‘God bless you;’ for immediately the food turned to fire that was like to consume them, and the coins became withered leaves in their shaking hands?”

Was it not on the battlemented roof of this old tower, too, that the white-haired, venerable sage sat—his astrologer robes hanging loosely from his shoulders, his wondrous Book of Fate laid open-leaved upon his knees, and mysterious Arabic books and still more mysterious astronomical instruments lying scattered about him—sat during night’s hours of solitude, gazing into the mighty “star-sown space” of the heavens and conversing with its innumerable orbs?

Yes, this *was* the very spot; and the popular belief is that this also was the spot where the dreaded wizard was so sadly importuned by the evil spirit who came every night demanding work to do. Auld Michael bade him cleave the Eildon Hills in three. The feat was accomplished in a single night—rather hastily, as one may guess from what seems to be a mighty spadeful of earth toppling somewhat clumsily on one of the peaks. Daylight, no doubt, arrived ere the work was completed, for the Prince of Darkness loves to work only in the dark, and the tumble-down summit is a memento of the demon’s haste and—handicraft!

This great exploit is very much open to question, for the Romans who invaded our country a thousand years and more before Scott’s days, encamped on one of the summits, and their writers speak of the “three hills”—*trimontes*—while remains of a Pictish tumulus are still visible. But it is scarcely to be wondered at that a shot so wide of the mark should be fired when so many things connected with such a man were mysterious, and the imagination of the aristocracy as well as the populace

was excited, and they hungrily welcomed the most degenerate and ridiculous superstitions.

Next night the demon was commanded to "bridle the Tweed with a curb of stone." And it was done. A basaltic dyke crosses the stream near Ednam! But the indefatigable fiend was not yet pacified. To get rid of the tormentor Scott set him to twist ropes out of sea-sand—a laborious task at which the infernal labourer, architect, and rope-spinner toiled unceasingly and toiled in vain.

Some say the deil's dead,  
And buried in Kirkcaldy.

So runs the old couplet. What a burial that must have been! Did the endless task given him by the wizard of Balwearie gnaw away the fibres of his knotty life? The hoary-headed warlock is, at all events, the reputed tamer of him; and down through the centuries house after house has been added to the "Lang Toon's" great longitude to keep the mischief-maker quiet.

What we might term reciprocity of piracy was very common in those days, and sailors revelled in plundering the vessels of another country when international laws were almost a nonentity. French pirates had just helped themselves too liberally to Scottish merchandise, and Michael was commanded to go to Paris for the purpose of remonstrating with the king of France. Preparatory to his departure the warlock retired to his consulting chamber, turned over the leaves of his magic Book of Might, and summoned to his presence a monstrous black horse—none other than the Prince of Darkness himself—on which he set out all alone for the sunny South. As they flew through the air, the Devil asked his rider what the old beldames of Scotland were wont to mutter at bed-time; but Michael was too ancient a disciple, and had more wits than the Evil One gave him credit for, therefore sternly replied, "What is that to thee? Mount, Diabolus, and fly!" When he reached Paris—an ambassador minus a retinue—the French monarch contemptuously refused to have anything



to do with him ; but the sturdy knight requested him to wait till his horse had stamped three times. At the first stroke of his mighty foot all the steeples in Paris shivered from their foundations, and the bells began to peal ; at the second three of the palace towers crashed to the ground, and the king, rather than endure the calamity which the uplifted hoof of the mighty Apollyon was ready to administer, granted the Scotsman's requests, and sent him on his way rejoicing.

At Oxford Scott is said to have had with him a train of brownies, who attended his beck and call and performed many prodigious exploits. A deep pathway between Kirkcaldy and Raith they excavated in a single night for their master. Near Dolphinton, in Lanarkshire, too, is a wonderful cutting in a spur of the hills, so extraordinary that it is a question of doubt whether it be the work of nature or not. Close by, there may also be seen a conical hill, called the Sugar-loaf, which the necromancer's familiar spirits are alleged to have constructed one night long ago, by riddling the earth which they dug from the hillside in making the cutting.

Strange and wonderful things took place after Michael returned from his continental tour. One tale tells how the great magician had been travelling one day, and when returning home, hungry and footsore, his appetite was awakened by the smell of newly-baked bannocks as he passed the open door of a farmhouse. His request for something to eat was churlishly refused, there being only enough to serve the wants of the reapers who were every moment expected in from a neighbouring *hairst rig*. At this want of courtesy Sir Michael gave his servant a scroll, and bade him put it on the door—

Maister Michael Scott's man  
Came seeking meat and gat nane ;  
So round about the fire I rin,  
With mazled legs and birsled skin.

When this was done, the mistress of the house suddenly

commenced to waltz with great dexterity round the fire, which was, according to the times, in the centre of the floor. She was shouting lustily the words of the spell as the reapers came in from the fields, and, yielding to the power of the enchanter, they too joined the dance, spinning round and round in hot pursuit, one after the other, like people possessed; and she cried and they cried till the kitchen was like a "house of bedlamites," and they were one and all ready to drop down from sheer exhaustion.

At last the farmer himself came upon the scene, and, hearing the hullabaloo, peeped in at the window. The situation was terrible. Catching sight of Scott and his servant not far off he went and begged him to undo the spell. Then, and not till then, did Sir Michael, telling the guidman to walk backward through the door and lift the scroll as he went, think that the Nabalish housewife had been sufficiently punished for her inhospitality.

Was it not in Balwearie, too, that the necromancer gave those wonderful feasts to his friends? And the strange thing about them was that Scott made no preparation whatever, yet no sooner were the guests seated at table than there suddenly appeared before them the choicest of viands and of wines—verily, the viands of kings, "worthy the table of the great Solomon," brought in by the wizard's demon servitors. Here was a dish purloined from the royal pantry of England, there a tit-bit which a moment before had been in the kitchen of France, and everywhere delicacies, all unequalled in sweetness of flavour, from all the distant pantries of kings. And the guests ate heartily and abundantly, and drank to overflowing, nevertheless invariably went away hungry, for the sumptuous repasts were only dreams, shams, mockeries. Michael's feasts were often Barmecide banquets; like Shacabae, in the Arabian Nights, the feasters enjoyed the good things only in dumb show; they fed on nothing—for Michael was a clever mesmerist, a downright cheat.

On one occasion the guests asked their host for a marvel, and a vine-tree sprouted up before their wondering eyes. They were told to take a bunch of the luscious fruit when Sir Michael should give the sign. "Cut!" exclaimed the magician; and, sudden as he spoke, each guest found himself with his neighbour's sleeve in the one hand and a knife in the other. Lo! the grapes were gone—it was all a dream.

Our hearts are *wae* and beat a sad accompaniment to the discomfiture of the hapless guests, to whom it is more than likely the castle harper chanted this mocking strain—

" What gars ye gant, my merrie men a',  
 What gars ye look sae drearie ;  
 What gars ye hang your heids sae low  
 In the Castle o' Balwearie ?"

Nothing circumstantial is known about Sir Michael's death. About 1290 he disappeared from society as suddenly as he burst in upon it in the rôle of one of the greatest scholars and scientists of his day. The place of his burial, too, is disputed; the honour is claimed by Melrose Abbey and by Coltrame Holme, in Cumberland. But what history fails to record about his last days is supplied by legendary tales. One tradition puts his death down to the machinations of a then-time Delilah who importuned him, in spite of all his arts and familiar spirits, into confessing "that he could defy everything except broth made from the flesh of a *breme* sow;" and from a dish of this he died. Another tradition asserts that he foretold his own death, and that it would take place by a stone falling on his head. He was standing in church one day with bent and bared head—a man yearning after divine things as ardently as he had searched for knowledge, and spurned and doubted by the Church which pronounced him a heretic, when a stone, loosened by the motion of the bell-rope, fell and wounded him mortally.

The author of *Waverley*, of course, avers that Sir Michael lies buried in Melrose's buttressed and gray-ruined abbey. In

the "Lay of the Last Minstrel" he makes the astonished old monk say to William of Deloraine when that knight appears at the abbey's holy pile to win for Lady Branksome the treasure of the tomb:—

“ And darest thou, Warrior ! seek to see  
What heaven and hell alike would hide ?

When Michael lay on his dying bed  
His conscience was awakenèd ;  
The words may not again be said,  
That he spoke to me on death-bed laid ;  
They would reud this Abbaye's massy nave,  
And pile it in heaps above his grave.

I swore to bury his Mighty Book,  
That never mortal might therein look ;  
I buried him on St Michael's night,  
When the bell tolled one, and the moon was bright ;  
And I dug his chamber among the dead,  
When the floor of the chancel was stainèd red,  
That his patron's Cross might over him wave,  
And scare the fiends from the Wizard's grave.

It was a night of woe and dread,  
When Michael in the tomb I laid !  
Strange sounds along the chancel passed,  
The banners waved without a blast.”—

Slow moved the Monk to the broad flag-stone  
Which the bloody Cross was traced upon ;  
He pointed to a secret nook,—  
An iron bar the Warrior took ;  
And the Monk made a sign with his withered hand,  
The grave's huge portal to expand.

Before their eyes the Wizard lay  
As if he had not been dead a day,  
His hoary head in silver rolled,  
He seemed some seventy winters old.  
A palmer's amice wrapt him round,  
With a wrought Spanish baldric bound,

Like a pilgrim from beyond the sea :  
 His left hand held his Book of Might ;  
 A silver cross was in his right ;  
 The lamp was placed beside his knee.  
 High and majestic was his look,  
 At which the fellest fiends had shook,  
 And all unruffled was his face :—  
 They trusted his soul had gotten grace.

Then Deloraine, in terror, took  
 From the cold hand the Mighty Book,  
 With iron clasped and with iron bound :—  
 He thought, as he took it, the dead man frowned ;  
 But the glare of the sepulchral light,  
 Perchance, had dazzled the Warrior's sight."

Sir Michael's magic books are said to have endured for some centuries, decipherable but only wholly intelligible to the master wizard himself. Dempster informs us that in his young days—about 1600 A.D.—they were supposed to be still in existence. yet, like Pandora's box, could not be opened without invoking the malignancy of the innumerable fiends " thrang and strang," who kept a vigilant eye upon them. When Satchelles, a doggerel poet of the seventeenth century, was visiting Burgh in Cumberland, in 1629, a gentleman showed him a volume reported to be the work of the Balwearie warlock. This is what he says :—

" The book which he gave me  
 Was of Sir Michael's Scott's historie,—  
 Which historie was never yet read through,  
 Nor never will, for no man dare it do.  
 Young scholars have picked out something  
 From the contents, but dare not read within.  
 He carried me along the castle then,  
 And showed his written book hanging on an iron pin ;  
 The volume of it did seem so large to me  
 As the Book of Martyrs and Turk's Historie.

His writing pen did seem to be  
Of hardened metal, like steel or accumie.

Then in the church he let me see  
A stone where Mr Michael Scott did lie ;  
He told me none durat bury under that stone,  
For Mr Michael's name does terrify each one."

Taken all in all Scott had no coeval in worth. Marvellous great man! Where are his equals? Linguist, astrologer, and chemist; hypnotist and chiromancer; mathematician, theologian, and philosopher; and seer and traveller to boot. Gesner designates him Michael Mathematicus—the Mathematician, and Holinshead Michael Medicus—the Physician. The sub-title of Great applies not amiss to him. He is mentioned by Dante in his "Divine Comedy," and Leslæus describes him as *singularii philosophiæ, astronomiæ, ac medicinæ laude prestans; dicebatur penitissimos magicæ recessus indagasse*—a man with a very high reputation for philosophy and astronomy, and distinguished by his extraordinary fame in medicine, and credited with having digged laboriously at the most hidden depths of "the black art" which was so much studied by scholars of all nations.

Spoken of in this strain by historians and biographers, it is not to be wondered at that Michael's memory survives in a thousand vulgar legends. He found it pleasurable to seek knowledge, and fairly revelled in its possession. Greater glory be his, too, when we remember that he lived six hundred years ago, and did much by his attainments to dispel the clouds which so darkly enveloped that benighted age.

Thy glory down the arch of time has roll'd,  
Like the great day-star to the ocean dim.