

The Lambton Worm

Long, long ago, John, Lord Lambton's spoilt young heir, was fishing for trout in the river. It was Sunday. "This is the Lord's day," said a passer-by. "You should be praying, not fishing!" The lad took no notice. He put a grub on the hook and cast his fishing line again. It hit the water with a plop.

For a while he had no luck and he lost his temper. He cursed the river. Then, suddenly, the rod jerked madly. Young Lambton thought he had hooked a huge fish and struggled with the catch. "You'll not beat me," he said, nearly falling over in the river. At last, he pulled his prize onto the sandy bank, and looked at it.

It was ugliest thing you ever did see: a worm-like creature, black as pitch and oozing slime. Its head, like a salamander's, had needle sharp teeth and nine holes along each side. It was thin like an eel, but had two legs at the front and two at the back, like a lizard. Despite being small, it twisted and coiled with amazing power. "Whatever kind of fish is this?" he said aloud. Just then an old man appeared from behind and looked at the creature. His face went pale and he quickly made the sign of the cross. "You must not put it back in the river," he said. "It bodes ill but you must choose what to do with it." Then the old man disappeared. With some hesitation, John Lambton put the creature into his basket.

As he walked towards home, he looked again at the hideous creature and shuddered. On the way, he passed a field with an ancient, very deep well. "There is no way the creature can escape from here," thought John. So, he tipped the basket up over the well and the worm dropped into the darkness below. After a while, Lambton heard a distant plop. Satisfied, he went back to the castle and forgot all about the worm. But, in the black waters of the well, at the bottom of that deep, dark hole something stirred, for the ugly creature grew and each year got stronger and stronger.

When John grew up, he decided to join the Crusades. His loving father gave him his blessing and all the villagers turned out to wish him well. Then, just over a year later, strange things began to happen. Shepherds found half eaten sheep. Just a few to begin with, but soon it became one every night. The cows started giving less and less milk. The smell near the well became terrible and strange vapours arose from its depths. People who drank its water complained of burning mouths and throats. The villagers thought the well had been cursed.

Then, one morning, they awoke to find a glistening trail of foul slime leading from the well to the Wear. There, in the middle of the river, wrapped around a rock, was a fully-grown dragon. It was enormous and fearful, with huge coils that gleamed in the morning sun. It had no wings, but a thick muscled body. Its head was large and its mouth full of razor-sharp teeth; poisonous vapours trailed from its nostrils and its mouth as it breathed.

The news spread around the countryside. Some people, brave enough, went as close as they dared to get a glimpse of the creature. Others locked themselves in their homes, or collected their belongings and fled. By day, the dragon rested on its rock, but by night it swam to the bank and coiled itself three times around a hill. Nobody felt safe. Soon, the beast became hungry. It started to rampage around because of its enormous appetite. It took lambs and sheep and ate them whole. It had a taste for milk and would tear a cow open with its sharp teeth. Soon, there were few sheep or cattle left.

Some brave villagers tried to kill the beast but were crushed or torn to pieces by its sharp fangs. If a piece was hacked from the dragon, it slithered over until the piece reattached. After each attack, the dragon would roam the countryside, uprooting trees, smashing

fences and stealing children. Soon people gave up trying to kill it.

Eventually the dragon came to Lambton Hall. The local residents were ready. They filled a large stone trough with warm milk and tied two sheep nearby. As the dragon approached the gates, it was distracted by the smell of the milk. It plunged into the trough and drained it dry. It ate the sheep with relish and, well fed, it returned to the hill. From that day on, the dragon stopped roaming the village. Every day, it slithered to the hall to find the offering of milk and sheep. The trail became marked by its path of dark slime.

Nearly seven years passed; the worm grew ever bigger and the people ever poorer. The land around the castle became quite barren. Then one day, a handsome young knight, in shining armour and riding a charger entered the castle grounds. It was the young Sir John, back from his adventures. That night the great hall was filled with people. "What has happened to all the trees on the south side of the castle?" asked the young knight, "Has there been war here?" A hush came over the gathering.

Sadly, his father told how the dragon had brought them to ruin. Horrified, John realized that the dragon was the same hideous worm he had thrown into the well all those years ago.

"It was my fault the dragon destroys our land," he declared. "So it is I who must rid Lambton of this evil menace." The crowd cheered. He began making a plan to defeat dragon. He listened closely to stories of the dragon's remarkable healing powers, and he learned its habits and its needs.

Then, he went to visit a local witch. She said that he alone could kill the worm. He must go to the blacksmith and have a suit of armour made, with razor sharp blades sticking out from its surface. Then he must go to the rock, and summon the dragon with his horn. "But mark my words well," said the wise woman. "If you slay the beast, you must then put to death the first thing that crosses your path as you pass the threshold of Lambton Hall. Otherwise, for the next nine generations, no Lambton will die peacefully in his bed." John swore on oath to follow the advice. The blacksmith forged him a suit of armour embedded with spikes. Then he went to the church to pray.

The next day, he waded into the river near the rock, blew his horn and awaited the dragon. It seemed to recognize him instantly. In its fury it lashed its tail, sending waves of water over him. Lambton swung his sword, slashing and cutting the dragon. But this time, when a piece was hacked off, it was swept away by the river before it could re-attach. And when the dragon coiled itself around Lambton, to crush him to death, the razor-edged spikes cut it to pieces. The more it tried to crush him, the worse it was sliced. Desperately, it tried to get back to the riverbank, but Lambton kept hacking away until it closed its fiery eyes. It was dispatched with one heavy sword blow to its head and was swept down the river, turned crimson with blood.

Exhausted, Lambton crawled from the water and blew three blasts on his horn. This was the signal for his father to release his favourite hound, to complete his vow. Unfortunately, his joyful father forgot and rushed out to greet John as he passed over the threshold. Worried, John blew another blast on his horn and the hound was released, and John killed it with one sweeping blow from his sword. But it was too late, for the vow was broken. What the witch fore-told, came to pass. For nine generations following the death of the dragon, no Lord of Lambton died peacefully in his bed.