



Lambton Castle is on the banks of the River Wear not far from Durham. Long ago, John, the young heir to Lambton was fishing in the river for trout. Now this seems a very ordinary thing for a boy to do, but he was doing it on a Sunday, which in those times was deemed a very bad thing to do.

"Sundays are the Lord's day," a passer-by said to him. "You should be at church, not here fishing!" But the youngster took no notice and kept right on tying together his fishing line in full view.

Earlier that day, he had found a wasp's nest and dug it up, sustaining only one sting as he beat a hasty retreat when the yellow-jacketed throng took to the air upon being disturbed. Fifteen minutes later he went back and picked up half a dozen little white grubs to use as bait, for wasp grubs are one of the favourite foods of trout.

Very confidently he walked down to what looked a likely spot and cast the bait into the water. It plopped into an eddy and young Lambton laid the rod in the fork of a stick pushed into the bank, and sat down to wait.

No sooner had he made himself comfortable than the rod bent and he had a bite! Quick as a wink he jerked the rod and set the hook. The fish took off and almost pulled him into the river.

"This one is a fighter," he said to himself. "It must be a salmon or a sea-trout!" Then the two of them battled on for a while until at last Lambton managed to haul the fish onto the riverbank.

"What kind of fish is this?" he said aloud, holding the creature up by the line and hook. "This is the ugliest thing on earth!" What Lambton had caught was thin like an eel, but it also had legs, two at the front and two at the back, much like a lizard. Whatever it was he had no intention of touching it, and looked around to see how he might get it off the hook without using his hands.

A little way off in a neighbouring field, there was a well with a trough nearby that cattle used to drink from when the river was in spate. Lambton ran over to this rod, line, worm and all. He dangled the creature over the well then, putting his boot against it, gave a mighty tug and the worm fell down into the black water below. Lambton returned to the river and kept on fishing until he had a brace of trout to take home. And he thought no more about the worm.

Years later, Lambton went to his father and announced his intention to go overseas to fight in a foreign war.

"The country squire is no life for me, Father," he said. "I should be in battle, testing my skills as a soldier." And although the father had no desire to see his son leave, he gave his blessing and wished him safe. Over the months following the departure of young Lambton, the estate grew to be a sadder place, for although he had been a rake, he was missed much. Then, in the second year after he was gone, strange things began to happen around the castle. Shepherds began to find dead sheep around the place a few to begin with, but soon it became one every night, half eaten and left in the pastures. The milk yield from the cows dropped so drastically that before long the castle had to send to Chester-le-Street for enough to get by. So the lord of the castle set men to keep watch

through the night and they discovered that the mayhem was caused by a great ugly worm that slithered each evening from the well by the river. It was the self same creature that young Lambton had thrown there all those years previously. And what a change ... it was enormous and fearful!

Many of the servants tried to kill it, but it always got the better of them. Each time a piece was hacked from it, the worm slithered over it until it reattached itself. After each attack, it would roam the countryside in a grievous mood and do more damage than usual, uprooting trees and smashing down fences, so that after a while, people gave up trying to kill it.

The old lord decided instead to try and keep the worm from getting angry by pouring many churns of milk into the trough by the well, and by tethering two sheep there each night. So the worm grew even bigger and the people grew even poorer. The land around the castle became quite barren and nobody ventured out at night to watch the worm slither from its lair at the river to wrap itself three times around a nearby hill before going for the food left out for it. To this day, that place is known as 'Worm Hill.'

One day, there came into the castle yard a single charger upon which was mounted a knight, tall and handsome, clad in shining armour and wearing a smile on his bronzed face. At once he was recognized as the young Sir John, back from his adventures in foreign lands, safe home from the dangers of war. A celebration was ordered at once and that night the great hall was filled with all the folks from around about. During the feasting, young Lambton leaned over to his father.

"What has happened to all the trees on the south side of the castle? Has there been war here?" His father looked sad for the first time that evening, and as a hush came over the gathering, he told the tale of what had transpired during the son's absence. By the end of the story, a darkness had covered the young man's face.

"It is my fault this worm goes unchecked through our land," he said solemnly. "It was I who first imprisoned it in the well and so I must be the one to rid Lambton of this wicked menace." And with this, a cheer

went up from the crowd at the renewed hope brought by this new champion.

The next day, true to his word, young Lambton began to ask questions in order to put together a plan to get rid of the worm. He listened closely to the stories of the worm's remarkable healing powers, and he learned its habits and its wants. Then he went to visit a witch who lived near Durham.

"You must await the worm at his island in the river, and attack while it is still in the water," she told him. "You must stud your armour with sharp spikes and razor-edged knives, and you must show no fear."

"That sounds easy enough," said Lambton. "What do I owe you for this information?"

"I need no reward," the witch whispered softly. "But the spell itself requires that you kill the first living thing you meet after slaying the worm. Otherwise, for the next nine generations no Lambton will die peacefully in his bed."

So when the young man got back to the castle, he told everyone what the witch had said, and instructed his father to let loose the hunting dogs as soon as the hunting horn was blown to signal the death of the worm.

The following day, Lambton settled himself among the rocks and ferns on the island in the river and awaited the arrival of the great worm. Presently he saw its fearsome outline against the riverbank as it entered the water, and he slid into the water and waded towards it. The worm seemed to recognize him instantly. In its fury it lashed its tail, sending sheets of water into the air. Lambton set about the serpent with his sword, slashing and cutting. This time, however, when a piece was hacked off, it drifted away in the river before it could be reattached. When the worm wrapped itself around Lambton, it cut itself terribly on the spikes and razor-edges, and the more it tried to crush him the worse it sliced itself to pieces. Desperately it tried to get back to the riverbank, but Lambton kept hacking away until it closed its fiery eyes and was swept away dead down the river. The young man crawled exhausted from the water and blew a shrill note of victory on his hunting horn.

But when his father heard the sound, he forgot that he was to release the dogs, and instead set off himself to check on his son. To Lambton's dismay, the first creature that he met after slaying the worm was not one of his hounds as he had expected, but his own father and, of course, he could not kill him. So what was foretold by the witch came to pass, and for nine generations following the death of the worm, no Lord of Lambton was to die peaceably in his bed.

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