

# THE SERPENT OF LINTON. •

ABOUT A. D. 1174.

IN the wall of the old church of the parish of Linton, in the county of Roxburgh, there is a sculpture representing a horseman in complete armour bearing a falcon on his arm,

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• *Memorie of the Somervills; Statistical Account of Scotland; Peerage of Scotland*

in the act of charging his lance down the throat of a four-footed animal resembling a bear or wolf, but in no point like a serpent. There was an inscription, now effaced, which the people alleged to have contained this rhyme—

“ The wode Laird of Lauristone  
Slew the worm of Worm’s Glen,  
And won all Linton parochine.”

Another version of this inscription is also preserved—

“ Wood Willie Somerville  
Killed the worm of Wormandail.  
For which he had all the lands of Linton,  
And six miles them about.”

The deed commemorated by this stone and the popular rhymes was achieved at a spot called the *Worm’s Glen*, and a traditional account of it is yet preserved by the inhabitants of the parish. It was achieved by Sir John Somerville, an ancestor of the barons of that name, who, in allusion to his exploit, bear for a crest an heraldic dragon. The story is thus related by James, eleventh Lord Somerville, and is told in almost similar language by the people of Linton. The animal is called a *worm* by the Noble writer, but the word *orme* or *worme* is in the ancient Norse the generic name for serpents. His Lordship quaintly describes it as “ in length three Scots yards, and somewhat bigger than an ordinary man’s leg, with a head more proportionable to its length than greatness, in form and colour to our common muir adders.

“ This creature, being a terror to the country people, had its den in a hollow piece of ground upon the side of a hill south-east from Linton church, more than a mile distant, which to this day is known by the name of the *Worm’s Glen*, where it used to shelter and rest itself, but when it sought after prey it would wander a mile or two from its residence, and make prey of all sorts of bestial that came in its way. This it easily did, because of its lowness by creeping among the bent, heather, or grass, wherein that

place abounded much by reason of the meadow ground, and a large moss fit for the pasturage of many cattle. Being naturally slow in its motions, it was not discerned before it was master of its prey, instantly devouring the same, so that the whole countrymen thereabout were forced to remove their bestial, and transport them three or four miles from the place, leaving the country desolate; neither durst any passenger go to the church or market for fear of this beast."

Several ineffectual attempts were made to destroy this formidable scourge, and the greatest consternation every where prevailed. Sir John Somerville, then a young man, heard the many strange reports concerning the animal, and became anxious to see it. He proceeded to Jedburgh, where he found the inhabitants in such a state of excitement that they were preparing to desert the town. The rustics who had fled there for shelter increased the alarm by the ridiculous stories they propagated concerning its appearance, some asserting that it increased in size every day, and that wings were distinctly attached to its body; others alleged that they had seen it during the night, and that it was altogether a mass of animated fire.

Somerville, nothing daunted by the rumours which the fears of the peasantry had greatly aggravated, resolved to obtain a view of the serpent. Being informed that it usually came out of its den about sunrise or sunset to wander over the fields in quest of prey, he went to the place at the dawn, and, says his Noble descendant, "he was not long near the place when he saw this strange beast crawl forth from its den, which observing him at some distance, he being on horseback, it lifted up its head with half of the body, and a long time stared him in the face with open mouth, never offering to advance or come to him. He took courage and drew much nearer that he might perfectly see all its shapes, and try whether it would dare to assault

him, but the beast turning almost in a half circle, returned to the den, never offering him the least prejudice, whereby he concluded that the creature was not so dangerous as the report stated, and that means might be adopted for its destruction."

Being informed that it would both be useless and dangerous to attempt to assault the animal by a sword or dagger, on account of the necessity of approaching it almost grappling, Sir John Somerville found that there was no other mode of killing it than by a sudden attack with a long spear on horseback. Having watched its movements several days, he found that it could not run backward, but required to turn itself in a half circle, and that it always stared at him with its mouth open. He caused a spear to be made nearly double the ordinary length, and plated with iron from the point downwards, "that no fire upon a sudden might cause it to fall asunder." This spear was made as he directed, and he took the precaution of training his horse with a blazing peat on the top of a lance, until the steed was familiarly accustomed to the smell, smoke, and light of the fire, and would not refuse to advance on the spur although it blew in his face. He also caused a small wheel of iron to be fixed within half a foot of the point of his spear, that the said wheel might turn on the least touch without hazarding the breaking of the weapon.

Sir John Somerville, having concluded his preparations, publicly intimated to the gentlemen and peasantry that on a certain day he would undertake to kill the monster or die in the attempt, and he invited as many of them as chose to be spectators. Many looked upon the invitation as a jest, and all concurred in censuring his rashness. "The appointed day," says Lord Somerville, "being come, somewhat before the dawning he placed himself, with a stout and resolute fellow his servant, whom he gained by a large

reward to hazard with him in this attempt, within half an arrow flight, or thereby, to the mouth of the den, which was no larger than to admit the outgoing and re-entering of the serpent, whom he now watched with a vigilant eye upon horseback, having before prepared some long, small, and hard peats, bedaubed with pitch, rosin, and brimstone, fixed with a small wire upon the wheel at the point of his lance, and these being touched with fire would instantly break out into a flame.—About the sun-rising, this serpent or worm, as by tradition it is named, appeared with her head and some part of her body without the den, whereupon the servant, according to direction, set fire to the peats upon the wheel at the top of the lance, and instantly this resolute gentleman put spurs to his horse, advancing with a full gallop, the fire still increasing, placed the same with the wheel, and almost the third part of his lance directly in the serpent's mouth, which went down the throat into the belly. The lance breaking by the rebound of his horse gave her a deadly wound. In the pangs of death, some part of her body being within the den, so great was her strength that she raised up the whole ground that was above her, and overturned the same to the furthering of her ruin, being partly smothered by the weight thereof."

The body of the serpent was taken from among the rubbish and exposed many days to the peasantry, who came great distances to view the dead object of their terror. The place where the animal is believed to have been killed is called the *Worm's Glen*, and the exploit of Sir John Somerville was commemorated in the sculpture which is still to be seen above the door of the old church of Linton. For this service he was also rewarded by a royal gift of the lands and barony of Linton, which continued long in the possession of his descendants the Lords Somerville.

Stories similar to this are to be found in the traditionary recollections of other nations. The Scottish legend only

requires to be a little embellished, which would make the reputed exploit of Sir John Somerville the more romantic. A young and beautiful lady should be introduced as vigilantly guarded by the monster, whom Sir John should be made to rescue and to marry, and various other particulars might be added by a fertile imagination, which would place the legend on a parallel with the mythological story of Perseus, or the exploits of the renowned Seven Champions of Christendom. The origin of the legend of the serpent of Linton is with probability intimated in the Statistical Account of the Parish. "Over one of the church doors," says the writer, "a man on horseback is cut on stone, killing with a spear a fierce animal. It is said to have been the last that infested this district when the woods were cut down. It seems to have been a deed of valour, as the memorial of it, we are told, is preserved on the crest of Lord Somerville's arms, whose ancestors once possessed a large estate in the parish."

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