

LEGEND OF THE DRAGON-SLAYER OF LYMINSTER.

By SAMUEL EVERSLED, Esq.

At the distance of about fifty yards north of Lyminster Church, by the side of the footpath which leads through the meadows from the church to Calceto, near Arundel, there is a small but deep pool of clear water, the lovely blue tint of which proves that it is a perennial spring, having its waters from the valleys in the chalk hills seen in the north.

Its overflowing waters find their way across the rich and level pastures into the river Arun, between Ford and Littlehampton; and so constant and powerful is the outpouring of the spring, that the pool is never frozen over, even in the severest winters. It is said that this mysterious spring has *no bottom*, and that many years ago the six bell ropes of Lyminster church were joined and let down, without fathoming its dreadful depths! The experiment having been repeated in our own matter-of-fact age, the depth is found, alas! to be only about thirty feet; yet "The Knucker Hole,"* as it is called, may even now be looked upon as, in some respects, the most remarkable spring in Sussex. Its only inhabitants at present are shoals of pretty fishes of the roach tribe, whose silvery scales, and deep red fins, place them for beauty, among our fresh water fishes, next to the spotted trout.

Very different, however, was the state of this tiny lake from twelve to fifteen hundred years ago; for it was then the haunt of a foul Monster which ravaged the country for miles round, flying with inconceivable rapidity through the air, and seizing men, women, and children, with sheep and oxen, it carried them off to its home in the swamps of the Arun, and there devoured them.

The country having been desolated for many years by this terrible Dragon, and the cultivation of the land having almost

* Perhaps from the Celtic *enuc* or Saxon *enuel*, a joint or junction. Several small streams of water still rise from, or have their confluence in, the pool.

An accident has unfortunately happened, at the last moment, to MR. EVERSLED'S etching of the "Knucker Hole" at Lyminster. In order not to retard the issue of the present volume, that plate will be given with Vol. xix.

entirely ceased, the King (whoever he may have been) offered his daughter in marriage to any man who should be so bold and lucky as to slay it. Many brave men rose up, anxious to relieve the poor sufferers and to win the beautiful princess, with her blue eyes, golden hair, and rosy cheeks; but one by one they perished in the contest, and their bones were not laid among those of their fathers.

At last a young hero, who had been away in his ship to foreign lands, sailed into the Arun, and, hearing of the general distress, after an interview with the King, sought the cruel Dragon in his lair:—

“ And full of fire and greedy hardiment,
 The youthful knight could not for aught be stayed ;
 But forth unto the darksome hole he went,
 And lookèd in ; his glistening armour made
 A little glooming light, much like a shade,
 By which he saw the ugly monster plain,
 Half like a serpent, horribly display'd,
 Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain.
 And as it lay upon the dirty ground,
 Its huge long tail its den all overspread,
 Yet was in knots and many folds upwound,
 Pointed with mortal sting.”

The reader may see the combat which ensued finely portrayed in Spenser's Red-Cross Knight, Canto I. It concludes:—

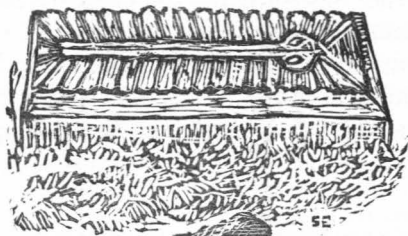
“ Thus ill-bested, and fearful more of shame
 Than of the certain peril he stood in,
 Half furious unto his foe he came,
 Resolved in mind all suddenly to win,
 Or soon to lose, before he would give in ;
 And struck at it with more than manly force,
 That from its body, full of filthy sin,
 He reft its hateful head without remorse ;
 A stream of coal-black blood forth gushèd from its corse.”

An ovation was accorded to the Dragon-slayer, and the beautiful Princess was duly bestowed upon him in marriage. It has even been asserted that some of the fair maidens of Western Sussex are lineally descended from this matchless pair!

Our tradition rests upon a much surer foundation than most others: indeed *it must be true*—for if the reader will turn back from gazing into “The Knucker Hole,” and repair to Lyminster church, along the little causeway which was cast up

by the monks of Calceto for the accommodation of foot passengers across the marsh in time of flood, he will find, just on the left of the church porch—

THE GRAVE-STONE OF THE MAN THAT KILLED THE DRAGON!



In case the reader should be unable to make a pilgrimage to this classic nook, the above rough woodcut, by a young amateur, is given from a faithful sketch made upon the spot.

Now, as to the origin of the above legend—for it is assumed that but few persons could be found in this nineteenth century to doubt the foundation in fact of such stories—the writer has long cherished the following theory.

Though the geologist assures us that the nearest approach to the Great Dragon of Romance which has ever existed upon our earth is some comical monster whose bones are found in our chalk hills, a grotesque compound of serpent, crocodile, and bat, much too feeble and too ancient to have afforded opportunity for the display of knightly prowess; yet we can but believe that the tales about Dragons, so prevalent on our southern coast, are grounded on some grave realities; and the conclusion to which the writer has come respecting these monsters of antiquity is that they had existence and were frequently met with in early historic times; and that indeed our misunderstanding concerning them is simply owing to our loss of the original meaning of the word “Dragon.” This word has descended to our rural population from the Ancient Britons—in Welsh, *dragon* is a leader, chief, or sovereign.

To translate the legend into sober matter-of-fact, we may understand, then, that about the year 477, “when Ella and his three sons, Cymen, Wlencing, and Cissa landed with a body of Saxons from three ships,” at Pagham, great struggles

commenced between these Saxon settlers and the "Dragons" of the British Tribes. There was, according to local tradition, a Celtic camp at Arundel, and its name is Celtic, being derived from *Aran*, a high place, an *alp*; and *Dól* a holm, or water-meadow; and a name more precisely and beautifully descriptive of the locality it would be impossible to find. The peaceful Britons of our fertile and sunny sea-board amalgamated with the Saxons by marriage, or were made slaves; the warriors and the rogues were driven to their strongholds on the hills, and Arundel being by far the strongest, situated as it was on a commanding and abrupt eminence, surrounded on three sides by water, with communication open to the great forests in the rear, would be the last to fall into the hands of the invaders. For centuries, it may be, after the founding of the Anglo-Saxon settlements of Wittering, Oving, Climping, Poling, Angmering, Patching, Ferring, Goring, Tarring, Sompting, and Lancing; after they had embraced Christianity, and had founded Selsey, Walberton, Yapton, Tortington, Rustington, and Preston; when they had beaten their swords into ploughshares, the fierce Pagan Britons swept down upon the flourishing but defenceless Saxon homesteads, burning and destroying all around. So great at last was the evil felt to be, that it was determined to capture the strong hold of the marauders; and at a general conclave the honour of a family alliance with the South Saxon Chieftain was publicly offered to the man who should successfully lead his bands against the hill-fort of the ancient enemy. The attempt, often renewed, was at length, by strength or stratagem, rewarded with success; Arundel fell into the hands of the Saxon, and the story of its siege, after floating for many generations from mouth to mouth among the Saxons of the coast, at last attached itself, in the form which has been related, to the curious tombstone and remarkable spring of water at Lyminster.