



THE LAIR OF THE
WHITE WORM

'A surreal and dark-humoured tale'
THE NEW YORK TIMES

BRAM STOKER



The Lair of the White Worm
by
Bram Stoker



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I

Adam Salton Arrives

When Adam Salton arrived at the Great Eastern Hotel he found awaiting him a letter in the hand-writing of his grand-uncle, Richard Salton, which he knew so well from the many kind letters which he had received from him in West Australia. The first of them had been written less than a year before, in which the old gentleman, who had in it claimed kinship, stated that he had been unable to write earlier because until then he did not know even of his existence, and it had taken him some time to find out his address. The last, sent after him, had only just arrived, and conveyed a most cordial invitation to stop with him at Lesser Hill for as long a time as he could spare. 'Indeed,' his grand-uncle went on, 'I am in hopes that you will make your permanent home here. You see, my dear boy, that you and I are all that remain of our race, and it is but fitting that you should succeed me when the time comes, which cannot be long now. I am getting close on eighty years of age, and though we have been a long-lived race, the span of life cannot be prolonged beyond reasonable bounds. I am prepared to like you and to make your home with me as happy a one as I can achieve. So do come at once on receipt of this and find the welcome I am waiting to give you. I send, in case such may make matters easy for you, a banker's draft for £500. Come soon, so that we may both of us have such happy days as are still possible to us. For me this is all-important, as the sands of my life are fast running out; but for you I trust there are many happy years to come. If you are able to give me the pleasure of seeing you, send me as soon as you can a letter telling me to expect you. Then

when you arrive at Plymouth or Southampton (or whatever port you are bound for), send me a telegram, and I shall come to meet you at the earliest hour possible.'

On Monday, Adam Salton's letter arrived by the morning post, saying that he hoped to travel by the boat which carried it, and that he would therefore be ready to meet his grand-uncle so soon after the arrival of the letter in Mercia as he should be able to reach London. 'I shall wait your arrival, sir, on the ship. By this means we may avoid any cross purposes.'

Mr Salton took it for granted that, no matter how fast he might travel, his guest would be awaiting him; so he gave instructions to have ready a carriage at seven the next morning to start for Stafford, where he would catch the 11.40 for Euston, arriving at 2.10. Thence, driving to Waterloo, he could catch the 3 P.M., due at Southampton at 5.38. He would that night stay with his grand-nephew, either on the ship, which would be a new experience for him, or, if his guest should prefer it, at a hotel. In either case they would start in the early morning for home. He had given instructions to his bailiff to send the postillion carriage on to Southampton to be ready for their journey home, and to arrange for relays of his own horses to be sent on at once. He intended that his grand-nephew, who had been all his life in Australia, should see something of central England on the drive. He had plenty of young horses of his own breeding and breaking, and could depend on a journey memorable to the young man. The luggage would be sent on by rail the same day to Stafford, where one of his own carts would meet it. Mr Salton, during the journey to Southampton, often wondered if his grand-nephew was as much excited as he was at the idea of meeting so near a relation for the first time; and it was with an effort that he controlled himself. The endless railway lines and switches round the Southampton Docks fired his anxiety afresh.

As the train drew up on the dockside, he was getting his

hand traps together, when the carriage door was wrenched open and a young man jumped in, saying as he came:

‘How are you, uncle? I wanted to meet you as soon as I could, but everything is so strange to me that I didn’t quite know what to do. However, I took chance that the railway people knew something of their own business – and here I am. I am glad to see you, sir. I have been dreaming of the happiness for thousands of miles; and now I find that the reality beats all the dreaming!’ As he spoke the old man and the young one were heartily wringing each other’s hands. He went on: ‘I think I knew you the moment I set eyes on you. I am glad that that dream was only enhanced by the reality!’

The meeting so auspiciously begun proceeded well. Adam, seeing that the old man was interested in the novelty of the ship, suggested timidly that he should stay the night on board, and that he would himself be ready to start at any hour and go anywhere that the other suggested. This affectionate willingness to fall in with his own plans quite won the old man’s heart. He warmly accepted the invitation, and at once they became not only on terms of affectionate relationship, but almost as old friends. The heart of the old man, which had been empty for so long, found a new delight. So, too, the young man found on landing in the old country a welcome and a surrounding in full harmony with all his dreams of such matters throughout all his wanderings and solitude, and the promise of a fresh and adventurous life. It was not long before the old man accepted him to full relationship by calling him by his Christian name. The other accepted the proffer with such heartiness that he was soon regarded as the future companion, almost the child, of his old age. After a long talk on affairs of interest, they retired to the cabin, which the elder was to share. Richard Salton, putting his hands affectionately on the boy’s shoulders – though Adam was in his twenty-seventh year, he was a boy, and always would be, to his grand-uncle, – said warmly:

‘I am so glad to find you as you are, my dear boy – just such a young man as I had always hoped for as a son in the days when I still had such hopes. However, dear boy, that is all past. But thank God there is a new life to begin for both of us. To you must be the larger part – but there is still time for some of it to be shared in common. I have waited till we should have seen each other to enter upon the subject; for I thought it better not to tie up your young life to my old one till we should have both sufficient personal knowledge to justify such a venture. Now I can (so far as I am concerned) enter into it freely, since from the moment my eyes rested on you I saw my son – as he shall be, God willing – if he chooses such a course himself.’

‘Indeed I do, sir – with all my heart!’

‘Thank you, Adam, for that.’ The old man’s eyes filled and his voice trembled. Then, after a long silence between them, he went on: ‘When I heard you were coming I made my will. It was well that your interests should be protected from that moment on. Here is the deed – keep it, Adam. All I have shall belong to you; and if love and good wishes or the memory of them can make life sweeter, yours shall be a happy one. And now, my dear boy, let us turn in. We start early in the morning and have a long drive before us. I hope you don’t mind carriage driving? I was going to have sent down the old travelling carriage in which my grandfather, your great-grand-uncle, went to Court when William IV was king. It is all right – they built well in those days – and it has been kept in perfect order. But I think I have done better: I have sent the carriage in which I travel myself. The horses are of my own breeding, and relays of them shall take us all the way. I hope you like horses? They have long been one of my greatest interests in life.’

‘I love them, sir, and I am happy to say I have many of my own. My father gave me a horse farm for myself when I was sixteen. I devoted myself to it, and it has gone on. Before I came away, my steward gave me a memorandum

that we have in my own places more than a thousand, nearly all good.'

'I am glad, my boy. Another link between us.'

'Just fancy what a delight it will be, sir, to see so much of middle England – and with you!'

'Thank you again, my boy. I shall tell you all about your future home and its surroundings as we go. We shall travel in old-fashioned state, I tell you. My grandfather always drove four-in-hand; and so shall we.'

'Oh, thanks, sir, thanks. May I take the ribbons sometimes?'

'Whenever you choose, Adam. The team is your own. Every horse we use to-day is to be your own.'

'You are too generous, uncle!'

'Not at all. Only an old man's selfish pleasure. It is not every day that an heir to the old home comes back. And – oh, by the way . . . No, we had better turn in now – I shall tell you the rest in the morning.'

II

The Caswalls of Castra Regis

Mr Salton had all his life been an early riser, and necessarily an early waker. But early as he woke on the next morning, and although there was an excuse for not prolonging sleep in the constant whirr and rattle of the 'donkey' engine winches of the great ship, when he waked he met the eyes of Adam fixed on him from his berth. His grand-nephew had given him the sofa, occupying the lower berth himself. The old man, despite his great strength and normal activity, was somewhat tired by his long journey of the day before and the prolonged and exciting interview which followed it. So he was glad to lie still and rest his body, whilst his mind was actively exercised in taking in all he could of his strange surroundings. Adam, too, after the pastoral habit to which he had been bred, woke with the dawn, if not before it, and was ready to enter on the experiences of the new day whenever it might suit his elder companion. It was little wonder, then, that, so soon as each realised the other's readiness, they simultaneously jumped up and began to dress. The steward had by previous instructions early breakfast prepared, and it was not long before they went down the gangway on shore in search of the carriage.

They found Mr Salton's bailiff waiting on the dock, and he brought them at once to where the carriage was waiting in the street. Richard Salton pointed out with pride to his young companion the suitability of the trap to every need of travel. It was a sort of double gig, excellently made, and with every appliance adapted for both speed and safety. To it

were harnessed four fine, useful horses, with a postillion to each pair.

‘See,’ said the old man proudly, ‘how it has all the luxuries of useful travel – silence and isolation as well as speed. There is nothing to obstruct the view of those travelling and no one to overhear what they may say. I have used that trap for a quarter of a century, and I never saw one more suitable for travel. You shall test it shortly. We are going to drive through the heart of England; and as we go I shall tell you what I was speaking of last night. Our route is to be by Salisbury, Bath, Bristol, Cheltenham, Worcester, Stafford; and so home.’

After remaining silent a few minutes, what time he seemed all eyes, for he perpetually ranged the whole circle of the horizon, Adam said:

‘Has our journey to-day, sir, any special relation to what you said last night that you wanted to tell me?’

‘Not directly; but indirectly, everything.’

‘Won’t you tell me now – I see we cannot be overheard – and if anything strikes you as we go along, just run it in. I shall understand.’

So old Salton spoke:

‘To begin at the beginning, Adam. That lecture of yours on “The Romans in Britain” set me thinking – in addition to telling me where you were. I wrote to you at once and asked you to come home, for it struck me that if you were fond of historical research – as seemed a fact – this was exactly the place for you, in addition to its being the place of your own forbears. If you could learn so much of the British Romans so far away in West Australia, where there cannot be even a tradition of them, what might you not make of the same amount of study on the very spot. Where we are going is in the real heart of the old kingdom of Mercia, where there are traces of all the various nationalities which made up the conglomerate which became Britain.’

After a slight pause Adam said:

‘I rather gathered that you had some more definite – more personal reason for my hurrying. After all, history can keep – except in the making!’

‘Quite right, my boy. I had a reason such as you very wisely guessed at. I was anxious for you to be here when a rather important phase of our local history occurred.’

‘What is that, if I may ask, sir?’

‘Certainly. The great owner of all this part of the county – of several of the counties – is on his way home, and there will be a great home-coming, which you may care to see. The fact is, that for more than a century the various owners in the succession here, with the exception of a short time, lived abroad.’

‘How is that, sir, if I may again ask?’

‘By all means. That is why I wished you to be here – so that you might learn. We have a good stretch without incident before us till we get in sight of Salisbury, so I had better begin now:

‘Our great house and estate in this part of the world is *Castra Regis*, the family seat of the Caswall family. The last owner who lived here was Edgar Caswall, great-grand-uncle of the man who is coming here – and he was the only man who stayed even a short time. His grandfather, also named Edgar – they keep the tradition of the family Christian name – quarrelled with his family and went to live abroad, not keeping up any relations, good or bad, with his relatives. His son was born and lived and died abroad. His son, the latest inheritor, was also born and lived abroad till he was over thirty, – his present age. This was the second line of absentees. The great-great-grandfather of the present Edgar also cut himself off from his family and went abroad, from which sojourn he never returned. The consequence has been that the great estate of *Castra Regis* has had no knowledge of its owner for six generations – covering more than a hundred years. It has been well administered, however, and no tenant or other connected with it has had anything to

complain of. All the same, there has been much natural anxiety to see the new owner, and we are all excited about the event of his coming. Even I am, though I own my own estate, which, though adjacent, is quite apart from *Castra Regis*. – Here we are now in new ground for you. That is the spire of Salisbury Cathedral, and when we leave that we shall be getting close to the old Roman county and you will naturally want your eyes. So we shall shortly have to keep our minds on old Mercia. However, you need not be disappointed. My old friend, Sir Nathaniel de Salis, who, like myself, is a freeholder near *Castra Regis*, though not on it – his estate, *Doom Tower*, is over the border of Derbyshire, on the Peak – is coming to stay with me for all the festivities to welcome Edgar Caswall. He is just the sort of man you will like. He is devoted to history, and is President of the Mercian Archæological Society. He knows more of our own part of the country, with its history and its people, than anyone else. I expect he will have arrived before us, and we three can have a long chat after dinner. He is also our local geologist and natural historian. So you and he will have many interests in common. Amongst other things he has a special knowledge of the Peak and its caverns, and knows all the old legends of the days when prehistoric times were vital.’

From this on till they came to Stafford, Adam’s eyes were in constant employment on matters of the road; and it was not till Salton had declared that they had now entered on the last stage of their journey that he referred back to Sir Nathaniel’s coming.

As the dusk was closing down they drove on to Lesser Hill, Mr Salton’s house. It was now too dark to see detail of their surrounding. Adam could just see that it was on the top of a hill, not quite so high as that which was covered by the Castle, on whose tower flew the flag, and which was all ablaze with moving lights, manifestly used in the preparations for the festivities on the morrow. So Adam deferred his curiosity

till daylight. His grand-uncle was met at the door by a fine old man, who said as he greeted him warmly:

‘I came over early as you wished me to. I suppose this is your grand-nephew – I am glad to meet you, Mr Adam Salton. I am Nathaniel de Salis, and your uncle is the oldest of my friends.’

Adam, from the moment of their eyes meeting, felt as if they were already old friends. The meeting was a new note of welcome to those that had already sounded in his ears.

The cordiality with which Sir Nathaniel and Adam met made the imparting of the former’s information easy both to speak and to hear. Sir Nathaniel was quite a clever old man of the world, who had travelled much and within a certain area studied deeply. He was a brilliant conversationalist, as was to be expected from a successful diplomatist, even under unstimulating conditions. But he had been touched and to a certain extent fired by the younger man’s evident admiration and willingness to learn from him. Accordingly the conversation, which began on the most friendly basis, soon warmed to an interest above proof as the old man spoke of it next day to Richard Salton. He knew already that his old friend wanted his grand-nephew to learn all he could of the subject in hand, and so had during his journey from the Peak put his thoughts in sequence for narration and explanation. Accordingly, Adam had only to listen and he must learn much that he wanted to know. When dinner was over and the servants had withdrawn, leaving the three men at their wine, Sir Nathaniel began:

‘I gather from your uncle – by the way, I suppose we had better speak of you as uncle and nephew, instead of going into exact relationship? In fact, your uncle is so old and dear a friend, that, with your permission, I shall drop formality with you altogether and speak of you and to you as Adam, as though you were his son.’

‘I would wish, sir,’ answered the young man, ‘nothing better in the world!’

The answer warmed the hearts of both the old men who heard. All the men felt touched, but, with the usual avoidance of Englishmen of emotional subjects personal to themselves, they instinctively moved from the previous question. Sir Nathaniel took the lead:

‘I understand, Adam, that your uncle has posted you regarding the relationships of the Caswall family?’

‘Partly, sir; but I understood that I was to hear minuter details from you – if you would be so good.’

‘I shall be delighted to tell you anything so far as my knowledge goes. Well, we have to remember, in connection with the events of to-morrow, that not less than ten generations of that family are involved. And I really believe that for a true understanding of the family ramifications you cannot begin better than having the list as a basis. Everything which we may consider as we go along will then take its natural place without extra trouble. The present branch of affairs begins only about something more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Later we may have to go further back, for the history of the Caswall family is coeval with that of England – we need not trouble ourselves with dates; the facts will be more easily grasped in a general way.

‘The first Caswall in our immediate record is Edgar, who was head of the family and owner of the estate, who came into his kingdom just about the time that George III did. He had one son of about twenty-four. There was a violent quarrel between the two. No one of this generation has any idea of the cause of it; but, considering the family characteristics, we may take it for granted that though it was deep and violent, it was on the surface trivial.

‘The result of the quarrel was that the son left the house without approaching a reconciliation or without even telling his father where he was going. He never came back to the house again. A few years after, he died without having in the meantime exchanged a word or a letter with his father. He married abroad and left one son, who seems to have been

brought up in ignorance of all belonging to him. The gulf between them appears to have been unbridgeable; for in time this son married and in turn had a son, but neither joy nor sorrow brought the sundered together. Under such conditions no *rapprochement* was to be looked for, and an utter indifference, founded at best on ignorance, took the place of family affection – even on community of interests. It was only due to the watchfulness of the lawyers that the birth and death of a new heir was ever made known. In time a second son appeared, but without any effect of friendly advance.

‘At last there arose a dim hope of some cessation of hostility, for though none of the separated made mention of the fact – knowledge of which was again due to the lawyers – a son was born to this youngest member of the voluntary exiles – the great-grandson of the Edgar whose son had left him. After this the family interest merely rested on heirship of the estate – any outside interest being submerged in the fact of a daughter being born to the grandson of the first Edgar. Some twenty years afterwards, the interest flickered up when it was made known – again through the lawyers – that the last two born had been married, thus shutting off any possibility of disputed heirship. As no other child had been born to any of the newer generations in the intervening twenty years, all hopes of heritage were now centred in the son of this last couple – the heir whose home-coming we are to celebrate to-morrow. The elder generations had all died away, and there were no collaterals, so there was no possibility of the heirship being disputed.

‘Now, it will be well for you to bear in mind the prevailing characteristics of this race. These were well preserved and unchanging; one and all they are the same: cold, selfish, dominant, reckless of consequences in pursuit of their own will. It was not that they did not keep faith, though that was a matter which gave them little concern, but that they took care to think beforehand of what they should do in order to gain their ends. If they should make a mistake someone else

should bear the burthen of it. This was so perpetually recurrent that it seemed to be a part of a fixed policy. It was no wonder indeed that whatever changes took place they were always ensured in their own possessions. They were absolutely of cold, hard nature. Not one of them – so far as we have any knowledge – was ever known to be touched by the softer sentiments, to swerve from his purpose, or hold his hand in obedience to the dictates of his heart. Part of this was due to their dominant, masterful nature. The aquiline features which marked them seemed to justify every personal harshness. The pictures and effigies of them all show their adherence to the early Roman type. Their eyes were full; their hair, of raven blackness, grew thick and close and curly. Their figures were massive and typical of strength.

‘The thick black hair growing low down on the neck told of vast physical strength and endurance. But the most remarkable characteristic is the eyes. Black, piercing, almost unendurable, they seem to contain in themselves a remarkable will power which there is no gainsaying. It is a power that is partly racial and partly individual: a power impregnated with some mysterious quality, partly hypnotic, partly mesmeric, which seems to take away from eyes that meet them all power of resistance, nay, deeper, all power of wishing to resist. With eyes like those set in that aquiline, all-commanding face one would need to be strong indeed to even think of resisting the inflexible will that lay beyond. Even the habit and the exercise of power which they implied was a danger to anyone who was conscious of a weakness on his own part.

‘You may think, Adam, that all this is imagination on my part, especially as I have never seen any belonging to the generation I have spoken of. So it is. But imagination based on deep study. I have made use of all I know or can surmise logically regarding this strange race. And with this data, however received, I have thought out logical results, correcting, amending, intensifying accepted conclusions, till at times

I see as though various members of the race had always been under my observation – that they are even under it still. With such strange compelling qualities, is it any wonder that there is abroad an idea that in the race there is some demoniac possession, which tends to a more definite belief that certain individuals have in the past sold themselves to the Devil? The Devil, I may say in this connection, is seldom mentioned *in propria persona*, but generally under some accepted guise, “The Powers of Evil,” “The Enemy of Mankind,” “The Prince of the Air,” etc. I don’t know what it is in other places; but along this eastern coast it is not considered polite to speak the truth plainly, baldly, in such matters, but to cover up the idea with a veil of obscurity in which safety or security may be hidden.

‘But I think we had better go to bed now. We have a lot to go through to-morrow, and I want you to have your brain clear, and all your susceptibilities fresh. Moreover, I want you to come with me in an early walk in which we may notice, whilst the matter is fresh in our minds, the peculiar disposition of this place – not merely your grandfather’s estate, but the lie of the country around it. There are many things on which we may seek – and perhaps find – enlightenment. The more we know at the start, the more things which may come into our view will develop themselves.’

So they all went off to bed.

III

Diana's Grove

Curiosity took Adam Salton out of bed in the early morning, but when he had dressed and gone downstairs, he found that, early as he was, Sir Nathaniel de Salis was ahead of him. The old gentleman was quite prepared for a long walk if necessary, and they started at once. Sir Nathaniel, without speaking, led the way a little to the east down the hill. When they had descended and risen again, they found themselves on the eastern brink of a steep hill. It was of lesser height than that on which the Castle was seated; but it was so placed that it commanded the various hills that crowned the ridge. All along the ridge the rock cropped out, bare and bleak, but broken in rough formed natural castellation. The form of the ridge was a segment of a circle, with the higher points inland to the west. In the centre rose the Castle on the highest point of all. Between the various rocky excrescences were groups of trees of various sizes and heights, amongst some of which were what in the early morning light looked like ruins. These – whatever they were – were of massive grey stone, probably limestone rudely cut – if indeed they were not shaped naturally. The largest of these clumps was of oak trees of great age. They crossed the least of the hills, that which lay to the eastward. The fall of the ground was steep all along the ridge, so steep that here and there both trees and rocks and buildings seemed to overhang the level plain far below. Through this level ran many streams, and there was a number of blue pools, where was evidently fairly deep water.

Sir Nathaniel stopped and looked all around him, as though to lose nothing of the effect. The sun had climbed the eastern

sky and was making all details clear. Sir Nathaniel pointed all round him with a sweeping gesture, as though calling Adam's attention to the wideness of the view. He did so so rapidly as to suggest that he wished the other to take, in the first survey, rather the *coup d'œil* than any detail. Having done so, he covered the ground in a similar way, but more slowly, as though inviting attention to detail. Adam was a willing and attentive pupil, and followed his motions exactly, missing – or trying to miss – nothing. When they had made the rough survey round the whole sweep of the eastern horizon, Sir Nathaniel spoke:

‘I have brought you here, Adam, because it seems to me that this is the spot on which to begin our investigations. You have now in front of you almost the whole of the ancient kingdom of Mercia. In fact, we see, theoretically if not practically, the whole of it except that furthest part which is covered by the Welsh Marches and those parts which are hidden from where we stand by the high ground of the immediate west. We can see – again theoretically if not practically – the whole of the eastern bound of the kingdom which ran south from the Humber to the Wash. I want you to bear in mind the trend of the ground, for some time, sooner or later, we shall do well to have it in our mind's eye when we are considering the ancient traditions and even superstitions and are trying to find the *rationale* of them. I think we had better not try to differentiate between these, but let them naturally take their places as we go on. Each legend, each superstition which we receive will help in the understanding and possible elucidation of the others. And as all such have a local basis, we can come closer to the truth – or the probability – by knowing the local conditions as we go along. It will help us to bring to our aid even such geological truth as we may have between us. For instance, the building materials used in various ages can afford their own lessons to understanding eyes. The very heights and shapes and materials of these hills, nay, even of the wide plain that

lies between us and the sea, have in themselves the materials of enlightening books.'

'For instance, sir?' said Adam, venturing a question.

'Well, for instance, look at those hills which surround the main one where the site for the Castle was wisely chosen – on the highest ground. Take the others. There is something ostensible in each of them, and in all probability something unseen and unproved, but to be imagined, also.'

'For instance?' continued Adam.

'Let us take them *seriatim*. That to the east, where the trees are, lower down. That was once the location of a Roman temple, possibly founded on a pre-existing Druidical one. Its name implies the former, and the grove of ancient oaks suggests the latter.'

'Please explain.'

'The old name translated means "Diana's Grove." Then the next one higher than it, but just beyond it, is called "Mercy." In all probability a corruption or perhaps a familiarisation of the word *Mercia* with a Roman pun included. We learn from early manuscripts that the place was called *Vilula Misericordiæ*. It was originally a nunnery founded by Queen Bertha, but done away with by King Penda, the reactionary to Paganism after St Augustine. Then comes your uncle's place – Lesser Hill. Though it is so close to the Castle, it is not connected with it. It is a freehold, and, so far as we know, of equal age. It has always belonged to your family.'

'Then there only remains the Castle!'

'That is all; but its history contains the histories of all the others – in fact, the whole history of early England.'

Sir Nathaniel, seeing the expectant look on Adam's face, went on:

'The history of the Castle has no beginning so far as we know. The furthest records or surmises or inferences simply accept it as existing. Some of these – guesses let us call them – seem to show that there was some sort of structure there when the Romans came, therefore it must have been a place

of importance in Druid times – if indeed that was the beginning. Naturally the Romans accepted it, as they did everything of the kind that was, or might be, useful. The change is shown or inferred in the name *Castra*. It was the highest protected ground, and so naturally became the most important of their camps. A study of the map will show you that it must have been a most important strategic centre. It both protected the advances already made to the north, and it helped to dominate the sea coast to the east. It sheltered the western marches, beyond which lay savage Wales – and danger. It provided a means of getting to the Severn, round which lay the great Roman roads then coming into existence, and made possible the great waterway to the heart of England – through the Severn and its tributaries. And it brought the east and the west together by the swiftest and easiest ways known to those times. And, finally, it provided means of descent on London and all the expanse of country watered by the Thames.

‘With such a centre, already known and organised, we can easily see that each fresh wave of invasion – the Angles, the Saxons, the Danes, and the Normans – found it a desirable possession and so ensured its upholding. In the earlier centuries it was merely a vantage ground. But when the victorious Romans brought with them the heavy solid fortifications impregnable to the weapons of the time, its commanding position alone ensured its adequate building and equipment. Then it was that the fortified camp of the *Cæsars* developed into the castle of the king. As we are as yet entirely ignorant of even the names of the first kings of Mercia, no historian has been able to even guess what king made it his ultimate defence; and I suppose we shall never know now. In process of time, as the arts of war developed, it increased in size and strength, and although recorded details are lacking, the history is written in not merely the stone of its building, but is inferred in the changes of structure. Then the general sweeping changes which followed the Norman Conquest wiped out all

lesser records than its own. To-day we must accept it as one of the earliest castles of the Conquest, probably not later than the time of Henry I. Roman and Norman were both wise in their retention of places of approved strength or utility. So it was that these surrounding heights, already established and to a certain extent proved, were retained. Indeed, such characteristics as already pertained to them were preserved and to-day afford to us lessons regarding things which have themselves long since passed away.

‘So much for the fortified heights; but the hollows too have their own story. But how the time passes! We must hurry home, or else your uncle will wonder what has become of us.’ As he spoke he was hurrying with long steps towards Lesser Hill, and Adam was furtively running to be able to keep up with him. When they had arrived close to the house, Sir Nathaniel said:

‘I am sorry to cut short our interesting conversation. But it will be only postponed. I want to tell you, and I am sure you want to know, all that I know of this place. And, if I am not mistaken, our next instalment of history will be even more interesting than the first.’

IV

The Lady Arabella March

Breakfast had just begun when Mr Salton said:

‘Now, there is no hurry, but so soon as you are both ready we shall start. I want to take you first to see a remarkable relic of Mercia, and then we shall go down to Liverpool through what is called “The Great Vale of Cheshire.” You may be disappointed, but take care not to prepare your mind’ – this to Adam – ‘for anything stupendous or heroic. You would not think the place you are going through was a vale at all, unless you were told it beforehand, and had confidence in the veracity of the teller. We should get to the Landing Stage in time to meet the *West African*. We ought to meet Mr Caswall as he comes ashore. We want to do him honour – and, besides, it will be more pleasant to have the introductions over before we go to his *fête* at the Castle.’

The carriage was ready, the same as was used the previous day. The postillions, too, were the same, but there were two pairs of different horses – magnificent animals, and keen for work. Breakfast was soon over, and they shortly took their places. The postillions had their orders, and they were soon on their way at an exhilarating pace.

Presently, in obedience to Mr Salton’s signal, the carriage drew up near Stone, opposite a great heap of stones by the wayside. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘is something that you of all men should not pass by unnoticed. That heap of stones brings us at once to the dawn of the Anglian kingdom. It was begun more than a thousand years ago, in the latter part of the seventh century, in memory of a murder. Wulfere, King of Mercia, nephew of Penda, here murdered his two sons for

embracing Christianity. As was the custom of the time, each passer-by added a stone to the memorial heap. Penda represented heathen reaction after St Augustine's mission. Sir Nathaniel can tell you as much as you want about this, and put you, if you wish, on the track of such accurate knowledge as there is.'

Whilst they were looking at the heap of stones, they noticed that another carriage had drawn up beside them, and the passenger – there was only one – was regarding them curiously. The carriage was an old heavy travelling one, with arms blazoned on it gorgeously. The coronet was an earl's, and there were many quarterings. Seeing then the occupant was a lady, the men took off their hats. The occupant spoke:

'How do you do, Sir Nathaniel? How do you do, Mr Salton? I hope none of you has met with any accident. Look at me!'

As she spoke she pointed where one of the heavy springs was broken across, the broken metal showing bright. Adam spoke up at once:

'Oh, that will be soon put right.'

'Soon? I shall have to wait till we get to Wolverhampton. There is no one near who can mend a break like that.'

'I can.'

'You!' She looked incredulously at the dapper young gentleman who spoke. 'You – why, it's a workman's job.'

'All right, I am a workman – though that is not the only sort of work I do. Let me explain. I am an Australian, and, as we have to move about fast, we are all trained to farriery and such mechanics as come into travel – and I am quite at your service.'

She said sweetly: 'I hardly know how to thank you for your kindness, of which I gladly avail myself. I don't know what else I can do. My father is Lord Lieutenant of the County, and he asked me to take his carriage – he is abroad himself – and meet Mr Caswall of Castra Regis, who arrives home

from Africa to-day. It is a notable home-coming; his predecessor in the event made his entry more than a century ago, and all the countryside want to do him honour.' She looked at the old men and quickly made up her mind as to the identity of the stranger. 'You must be Mr Salton – Mr Adam Salton of Lesser Hill. I am Lady Arabella March of Diana's Grove.' As she spoke she turned slightly to Mr Salton, who took the hint and made a formal introduction.

So soon as this was done, Adam took some tools from his uncle's carriage, and at once began work on the broken spring. He was an expert workman, and the breach was soon made good. Adam was gathering the tools which he had been using, and which, after the manner of all workmen, had been scattered about, when he noticed that several black snakes had crawled out from the heap of stones and were gathering round him. This naturally occupied his mind, and he was not thinking of anything else when he noticed Lady Arabella, who had opened the door of the carriage, slip from it with a quick gliding motion. She was already among the snakes when he called out to warn her. But there seemed to be no need of warning. The snakes had turned and were wriggling back to the mound as quickly as they could. He laughed to himself behind his teeth as he whispered, 'No need to fear there. They seem much more afraid of her than she of them.' All the same he began to beat on the ground with a stick which was lying close to him, with the instinct of one used to such vermin. In an instant he was alone beside the mound with Lady Arabella, who appeared quite unconcerned at the incident. Then he took a long look at her. She was certainly good to look at in herself, and her dress alone was sufficient to attract attention. She was clad in some kind of soft white stuff, which clung close to her form, showing to the full every movement of her sinuous figure. She was tall and exceedingly thin. Her eyes appeared to be weak, for she wore large spectacles which seemed to be of green glass. Certainly in the centre they had the effect of making her naturally piercing

eyes of a vivid green. She wore a close-fitting cap of some fine fur of dazzling white. Coiled round her white throat was a large necklace of emeralds, whose profusion of colour quite outshone the green of her spectacles – even when the sun shone on them. Her voice was very peculiar, very low and sweet, and so soft that the dominant note was of sibilation. Her hands, too, were peculiar – long, flexible, white, with a strange movement as of waving gently to and fro.

She appeared quite at ease, and, after thanking Adam, said that if any of his uncle's party were going to Liverpool she would be most happy to join forces. She added cordially:

‘Whilst you are staying here, Mr Salton, you must look on the grounds of Diana's Grove as your own, so that you may come and go just as you do in Lesser Hill. There are some fine views and not a few natural curiosities which are sure to interest you. There are some views in the twilight which are, they say, unique. And if you are a student of natural history – specially of an earlier kind, when the world was younger – you shall not have your labour of discovery in vain.’

The heartiness with which she spoke and warmth of her words – not of her manner, which was abnormally cold and distant – repelled him, made him suspicious. He felt as if he was naturally standing on guard. In the meantime both his uncle and Sir Nathaniel had thanked her for the invitation – of which, however, they said they were unable to avail themselves. Adam had a sort of suspicion that though she answered regretfully, she was in reality relieved. When he had got into the carriage with the two old men and they had driven off, he was not surprised when Sir Nathaniel said:

‘I could not but feel that she was glad to be rid of us. She can play her game better alone!’

‘What is her game, sir?’ asked Adam unthinkingly, but the old man answered without comment:

‘All the county knows it, my boy. Caswall is a very rich man. Her husband was rich when she married him – or seemed to be. When he committed suicide it was found that

he had nothing at all. Her father has a great position and a great estate – on paper. But the latter is mortgaged up to the hilt, and is held in male tail only, so that her only hope is in a rich marriage. I suppose I need not draw any conclusion. You can do that as well as I can.’

Adam remained silent nearly all the time they were travelling through the alleged Vale of Cheshire. He thought much during that journey and came to several conclusions, though his lips were unmoved. One of these conclusions was that he would be very careful about paying any attention to Lady Arabella. He was himself a rich man, how rich not even his uncle had the least idea, and would have been surprised had he known. The other resolution was that he would be very careful how he went moonlighting in Diana’s Grove, especially if he were unattended.

At Liverpool they went aboard the *West African*, which had just come to the landing-stage. There his uncle introduced himself to Mr Caswall, and followed this up by introducing Sir Nathaniel and then Adam. The new-comer received them all very graciously, and said what a pleasure it was on coming home after so long an absence of his family from their old seat, and hoped they would see much of each other in the future. Adam was much pleased at the warmth of the reception; but he could not avoid a feeling of repugnance at the man’s face. He was trying hard to overcome this when a diversion was caused by the arrival of Lady Arabella. The diversion was welcome to all; the two Saltons and Sir Nathaniel were shocked at Caswall’s face – so hard, so ruthless, so selfish, so dominant. ‘God help any,’ was the common thought, ‘who is under the domination of such a one!’

But presently his African servant approached him, and at once their thoughts changed to a larger toleration. For by comparison with this man his face seemed to have a certain nobility hitherto lacking. Caswall looked indeed a savage – but a cultured savage. In him were traces of the softening civilisation of ages – of some of the higher instincts and education

of man, no matter how rudimentary these might be. But the face of Oolanga, as his master at once called him, was pure pristine, unreformed, unsoftened savage, with inherent in it all the hideous possibilities of a lost, devil-ridden child of the forest and the swamp – the lowest and most loathsome of all created things which were in some form ostensibly human.