

The Lair of the White Worm



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Chapter

1 Adam Salton Arrives

Adam Salton sauntered into the Empire Club, Sydney, and found awaiting him a letter from his grand-uncle. He had first heard from the old gentleman less than a year before, when Richard Salton had claimed kinship, stating that he had been unable to write earlier, as he had found it very difficult to trace his grand-nephew's address. Adam was delighted and replied cordially; he had often heard his father speak of the older branch of the family with whom his people had long lost touch. Some interesting correspondence had ensued. Adam eagerly opened the letter which had only just arrived, and conveyed a cordial invitation to stop with his grand-uncle at Lesser Hill, for as long a time as he could spare.

"Indeed," Richard Salton went on, "I am in hopes that you will make your permanent home here. You see, my dear boy, you and I are all that remain of our race, and it is but fitting that you should succeed me when the time comes. In this year of grace, 1860, I am 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 as you could wish. 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 200 pounds. Come soon, so that we may both of us enjoy many happy days together. If you are able to give me the pleasure of seeing you, send me as soon as you can a letter telling me when to expect you. Then when you arrive at Plymouth or Southampton or whatever port you are bound for, wait on board, and I will meet you at the earliest hour possible."

Old Mr. Salton was delighted when Adam's reply arrived and sent a groom hot-foot to his crony, Sir Nathaniel de Salis, to inform him that his grand-nephew was due at Southampton on the twelfth of June.

Mr. Salton gave instructions to have ready a carriage early on the important day, to start for Stafford, where he would catch the 11.40 a.m. train. He would stay that night 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 rural 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 to Stafford, where one of his 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.

"How are you, uncle? I recognised you from the photo you sent me! 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, here I am. I am glad to see you, sir. I have been dreaming of this happiness for thousands of miles; 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.

The meeting so auspiciously begun proceeded well. Adam, seeing that the old man was interested in the novelty of the ship, suggested 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 like old friends. The heart of the old man, which had been empty for so long, found a new delight. The young man found, on landing in the old country, a welcome and a surrounding in full harmony with all his dreams throughout 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. After a long talk on affairs of interest, they retired to the cabin, which the elder was to share. Richard Salton put 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.

"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, 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 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. 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 driving? I was going to have 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 eighteen. 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 place 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 England—and with you!"

"Thank you again, my boy. I will 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."

Chapter

2 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—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, 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 looking out for them 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 vehicle for every need of travel. To it were harnessed four 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'll tell you what I was speaking of last night. Our route is to be by Salisbury, Bath, Bristol, Cheltenham, Worcester, Stafford; and so home."

Adam remained silent a few minutes, during which he seemed all eyes, for he perpetually ranged the whole circle of the horizon.

"Has our journey to-day, sir," he asked, "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,' a report of which you posted to me, set me thinking—in addition to telling me your tastes. 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 home of your own forbears. If you could learn so much of the British Romans so far away in New South Wales, 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."

"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. 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 principal land-owner of our part of the county is on his way home, and there will be a great home-coming, which you may care to see. The fact is, for more than a century the various owners in the succession here, with the exception of a short time, have lived abroad."

"How is that, sir, if I may ask?"

"The great house and estate in our part of the world is *Castra Regis*, the family seat of the Caswall family. The last owner who lived here was Edgar Caswall, grandfather of the man who is coming here—and he was the only one who stayed even a short time. This man's 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 intercourse, good or bad, with his relatives, although this particular Edgar, as I told you, did visit his family estate, yet his son was born and lived and died abroad, while his grandson, 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 estate of *Castra Regis* has had no knowledge of its owner for five generations—covering more than a hundred and twenty years. It has been well administered, however, and no tenant or other connected with it has had anything of which to complain. 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 free- holder near Castra Regis—his estate, Doom Tower, is over the border of Derbyshire, on the Peak—is coming to stay with me for 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 Archaeological 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 prehistoric times."

They spent the night at Cheltenham, and on the following morning resumed their journey to Stafford. Adam's eyes were in constant employment, and it was not till Salton declared that they had now entered on the last stage of their journey, that he referred 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 any details of their surroundings. 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 greeted him warmly.

"I came over early as you wished. 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 one of my oldest friends."

Adam, from the moment of their eyes meeting, felt as if they were already 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 information easy. Sir Nathaniel was a clever 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 should like," answered the young man, "nothing better!"

The answer warmed the hearts of both the old men, but, with the usual avoidance of Englishmen of emotional subjects personal to themselves, they instinctively returned to 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, the first Caswall in our immediate record is an Edgar, 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; 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 a reconciliation or without even telling his father where he was going. He never came back 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 unbridgable; 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 of this new heir was ever made known. He actually spent a few months in the ancestral home.

"After this the family interest merely rested on heirship of the estate. As no other children have been born to any of the newer generations in the intervening years, all hopes of heritage are now centred in the grandson of this man.

"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 own 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 that, whatever changes took place, they were always ensured in their own possessions. They were absolutely cold and hard by 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. 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, all power of wishing to resist. With eyes like those, set in that all-commanding face, one would need to be strong indeed to think of resisting the inflexible will that lay behind.

"You may think, Adam, that all this is imagination on my part, especially as I have never seen any of them. 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. 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?

"But I think we had better go to bed now. We have a lot to get 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 for an early walk, during which we may notice, whilst the matter is fresh in our minds, the peculiar disposition of this place—not merely your grand-uncle'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."

Chapter

3 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 was ahead of him. The old gentleman was quite prepared for a long walk, and they started at once.

Sir Nathaniel, without speaking, led the way 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 situated; 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 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 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 plain far below, through which ran many streams.

Sir Nathaniel stopped and looked around, as though to lose nothing of the effect. The sun had climbed the eastern sky and was making all details clear. He pointed with a sweeping gesture, as though calling Adam's attention to the extent of the view. Having done so, he covered the ground 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.

"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 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—theoretically—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 superstitions, and are trying to find the RATIONALE of them. Each legend, each superstition which we receive, will help in the