



A wild hand-to-hand fight broke out

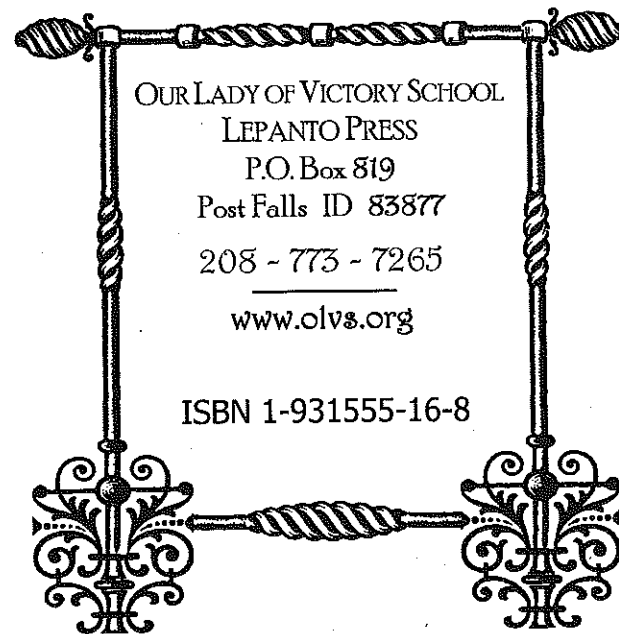
(see page 206)

RONALD WELCH

THE GAUNTLET



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OUR LADY OF VICTORY SCHOOL
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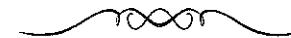
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of the names of people and places in this story are imaginary, whilst others are taken from history.

There is, for instance, a castle at Carreg Cennen (sometimes spelt Caer Cynan on maps), about five miles from Llandilo. It is still in a good state of preservation, including the extraordinary passage cut through the solid rock of the precipice. Kidwelly Castle is now in the hands of the Ministry of Works, who have preserved the whole castle.

There was a monastery at Valle Crucis, but it is in North Wales, and not where I have placed it in this book. The names of the South Wales Marcher Lords are historic, except for the family of de Blois, and there is no such village as Llanferon.

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Peter Finds the Gauntlet

'I'm sure we're going the wrong way,' Peter Staunton said. 'Let's try to the left for a change.'

'No! Straight on!' Gwyn Evans retorted with great confidence.

Peter shrugged his shoulders, and stumbled over the uneven ground behind Gwyn. The mountain mist had closed down on them now, thick, damp and clinging, with an air of grim persistence that was somewhat alarming.

They were quite hopelessly lost, Peter decided, and had been so for the last half-hour, ever since they had wandered off the narrow sheep-track along which they had made their way across the top of the mountain. It was this track they were trying to find now, for without its help they had not the slightest idea of even the direction they should take. If they found it, they were as good as home. If not . . . but Peter shied away from the thought.

He stumbled, and nearly fell. Gwyn heard his sudden exclamation, and turned quickly.

'Found it?' he called out anxiously.

'No, worse luck. Tripped over something.'

Peter was bending down examining some object on the ground when Gwyn reached him.

'What on earth is it?' Gwyn asked.

'Haven't the foggiest,' Peter grunted. He picked up the object. 'Hi, wait a sec, Gwyn,' he said, as his friend started to move away. 'It looks interesting.'

'Waste of time, Peter. It's only an old glove.'

'Pretty funny one,' Peter remarked. 'It's made of iron. Look!'

Gwyn turned back reluctantly, and then his interest was aroused.

'Like a huge batting glove,' he said.

He was right, but it was larger and heavier than any cricket glove they had seen before. The inside of the glove covering the palm of the hand was of thick rough leather, worn and creased; the back of each finger and the thumb piece were covered with thick pieces of steel.

Peter gazed at it in silence. His head was feeling oddly numb, and the mist seemed to swirl around him with redoubled speed and thickness. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he slipped his right hand inside the heavy gauntlet, and his fingers groped inside the wide spaces, for it was far too large for his small hand.

From behind there came the thud of hooves, a shout, shrill and defiant, the clang of metal on metal, and then a confused roar of sounds, shouts, more hoof-beats, clang after clang, dying away into the distance as suddenly as they had come. The gauntlet slipped from Peter's hand, and he shook himself as if he had just awakened.

'What was that?' he whispered.

'What?' asked Gwyn looking curiously at Peter's face.

'Horses, and somebody shouting,' Peter said, shaking his head to try and clear away the sensation of numbness.

'Horses!' Gwyn peered into the white mist that surrounded them. 'I didn't hear anything. Might be a farmer. That means we're close to the track. Come on, Peter!'

He dashed off, and as his figure disappeared in the clinging mist, Peter shook his head once more, and hurried after him. Almost immediately he heard a triumphant shout from Gwyn.

'Here it is, Peter. The track!'

Peter laughed with sudden relief, and the odd sensation of numbness and dread which had swept over him disappeared in a flash, as he reached Gwyn's side. They were standing on a thin track that wound its way like a snake over the rough ground. Unimpressive as it appeared, that thin line meant home, tea, and a roaring fire.

'Which way though?' he said.

'We must work this out scientifically,' Gwyn said.

Peter grinned. He had heard Gwyn before on scientific methods.

'No need,' he said. 'See that bush there? That was on our right when we came up, so if we keep it on the left now, we'll go the right way.'

'How do you know it's the same bush?' snapped Gwyn.

'Sure of it,' Peter said doggedly. 'I remember the pile of stones on one side.'

'O.K.,' Gwyn said, 'I remember now. That's what I mean by working it out scientifically.'

'Sez you,' Peter retorted rudely, and set off briskly along the track.

Now that they had found the track, they wasted little time, and kept up a good pace. Ten minutes hard walking brought them to the foot of the mountain. The lower they dropped, the more the mist lifted, until they suddenly found themselves in the bright sunshine of mid-afternoon.

'Ought to see Carreg Cennen now,' Gwyn said.

'What's that?' Peter asked quickly. He had never heard the name before, he felt certain, but there was a curious feeling of familiarity about it that aroused his interest.

'It's a castle,' Gwyn said, 'over in that direction,' and he pointed to the left.

They were at the foot of the mountain now, about a mile further up the valley from their original starting-point earlier that afternoon. Peter looked in the direction of Gwyn's finger, and saw the ground rise sharply to a narrow point. It was difficult to see how high it was, for the mist still covered at least half the slope. But over the top of the white mist Peter saw the turrets of a ruined castle. They looked grim and forbidding in that lonely spot, and had an air of brooding watchfulness.

'Gosh! That's marvellous!' Peter muttered.

'Not bad,' Gwyn said indifferently. He had seen Carreg Cennen before, and castles, as he had told Peter several times, were not in his line. Not scientific enough.

But to Peter that brief glimpse had meant a great

deal. For history fascinated him, not only the actual reading, but the sight of old buildings, spots where battles had been fought, any place where his vivid imagination was given an opportunity of conjuring up the past. And Carreg Cennen had caught his interest in a way he had never experienced before. As he followed Gwyn down the winding road, his eyes kept switching round as if drawn by some giant magnet. Then they turned a corner, and the turrets dropped from sight.

They were home half an hour later, for Peter was staying with an uncle of Gwyn's, a Mr Evans, who lived in a large sprawling house in the depths of the Welsh mountains, and just outside the village of Llanferon. Tea was ready for them in the lounge, a long room at the front of the house, and Mr Evans himself, a short alert little Welshman, was pouring out.

'Expecting the Vicar,' he said. 'He often drops in about this time.'

Peter and Gwyn started to eat, for they were hungry after their climb. This was one of the best moments of the day, Peter decided, as he ploughed his way steadily through a plateful of crumpets, and glanced round the walls of the room, with the high bookcases, and rows of books.

'Ah, here he is,' Mr Evans said, as voices were heard in the hall outside.

The Vicar of Llanferon was a pleasant sight, tall, stout, and with a round red face of great cheerfulness. His hair was white, but his manner was that of a much younger man, with tremendous enthusiasm and vigour.

'What have you two been doing with yourselves?' he asked, after he had filled his plate with crumpets.

'We went up Carn Eglwys, sir,' Gwyn said.

'Ah, interesting spot that,' the Vicar said. 'They call it the Hill of the Normans around here, you know.'

'That's a queer name, sir,' Peter said, his historical sense aroused. 'Is there any special reason?'

'Oh, yes,' the Vicar said, turning towards Peter and obviously pleased at finding someone interested in his own pet subject of local history. 'There was a battle fought up there. Back in the eleventh century. The Normans were in the process of over-running South Wales then, you see, and the Welsh in this area made a last stand on the mountain.'

'Who won?' Gwyn said.

'Difficult to say, my dear boy. It was a pretty murderous fight, by all accounts, and the mist made it even . . .'

'The mist?' Peter said quickly.

'Yes. There was a heavy mist on the mountain, according to the old chronicle, the sort of weather you ran into this afternoon, and both sides had a good many casualties. The Welsh withdrew into the valleys, so I suppose you might call it a Norman victory.'

'Welsh!' Gwyn said stoutly.

'Norman!' Peter insisted.

They grinned at each other, and the Vicar watched them with a smile. For there was a curious racial difference about their appearance; Peter with his dark hair and straight clear-cut features; and

Gwyn, dark too, but with the slightly olive complexion of the pure Welsh strain. They were both of them startling throwbacks to the two races from which they had sprung.

Peter's imagination had already started to picture the scene on Carn Eglwys, the white drifting mist, the half-seen figures on horseback, the shouts, the clang of swords, the drum of hooves on the soft turf . . .

He sat up with a jerk.

'The gauntlet!' he exclaimed sharply. 'The gauntlet!'

'The what?' gasped the Vicar. He dropped his pipe with a clatter in the stone fireplace, and leant forward, staring at Peter with an expression of the most extraordinary intentness. Mr Evans, too, was watching with a similar glance of sudden excited interest.

'I found a funny sort of glove on the mountain,' Peter said.

'Yes, so we did,' Gwyn added. 'Like a batting glove, except that it had thick chunks of iron on the back instead of rubber.'

'Did you put it on, Peter?' the Vicar said eagerly.

'Yes, I did,' Peter said, and the Vicar grunted softly, his eyes still fixed intently on Peter's face.

'Did you see or hear anything?' Mr Evans asked.

'Yes, I did,' Peter said slowly, trying to remember what had happened. 'I heard horses galloping, some shouts, and what sounded like loud clangs, as if there was a fight going on with swords and armour.'

'Aaah!' breathed the Vicar. He sank back into his chair, and exchanged glances with Mr Evans. The two old gentlemen nodded at each other.

"'There are more things in Heaven and Earth,'" muttered the Vicar under his breath.

But Peter had caught the remark, and he recognized the quotation from *Hamlet*. He sat up quickly.

'What do you mean, sir?' he asked curiously.

'There's a curious legend about Carn Eglwys,' the Vicar said.

'About the battle?' Peter asked.

'Yes. At a certain time of the year, people have found a medieval gauntlet up there, and then heard sounds of battle. Shouts, the thud of hooves, the clash of swords.'

'What?' Peter said. He rubbed his forehead in bewildered excitement.

'Just as you did,' Mr Evans said. 'Around Easter The battle was fought on Easter Monday, you see.'

'Have you ever found the gauntlet?' Peter asked.

The two men shook their heads regretfully.

'Never,' the Vicar said. 'And not for lack of trying.'

'But who has heard these sounds?' Peter persisted.

'Well, old Rice Llewellyn, for one,' the Vicar said. 'He lives in Llanferon. He says he saw figures, besides hearing the sounds. They were on horseback, and carrying shields.'

'Imagination,' Gwyn said.

'Oh, no, my dear Gwyn,' the Vicar said emphatically. He drew fiercely on his pipe, and blew a

great cloud of blue smoke across the room. 'There was the evidence of the shields. That was conclusive. Conclusive!' he boomed triumphantly.

'But why?'

'Old Rice described the shields. He said they were kite shaped,' Mr Evans said in his soft Welsh voice.

'And the Norman shields *were* kite shaped!' exclaimed the Vicar. 'You can see them on the Bayeux Tapestry.'

He leant forward in his chair, and pointed the stem of his pipe at Peter.

'And how could he know that?' he demanded excitedly. 'Old Rice never went to school. He can't even read, and I don't suppose he has ever opened a book in his life!'

Even Gwyn whistled softly at that evidence, whilst Peter wriggled in his chair with excitement and mounting interest.

There was silence in the room, and they all stared at the fire. A log dropped, and a shower of sparks shot up, followed by a spurt of flame.

'What about the other people who found the gauntlet?' Peter asked after a pause.

'Ah!' The Vicar sat up again. 'Now, that's very interesting. John,' and he waved the pipe in the direction of Mr Evans, 'John and I made a close study of that part of the legend. There was Lord Roust, in Queen Anne's day. He had estates near Llanferon.'

'There was Roger Williams in 1640,' Mr Evans said.

'And Mervyn Rees in 1802.'

'David Llewellyn in 1858.'

'And, of course, the Frenchman, in 1870!' the Vicar said with an air of a man producing his trump card. 'That proved our point, John. Proved my theory to the hilt!'

'What is your theory, sir?' Peter asked.

'Ah, now you're asking, my dear boy!' The Vicar was full of his absorbing hobby now. 'One fact struck us immediately about this story. We noticed in every case that the person who found the gauntlet had some long-standing connexion with Carn Eglwys. Lord Roust, for instance, was a direct descendant of a Norman baron who settled here at that time. Probably fought in the actual battle.'

'But the villagers?' Peter asked. 'What about Rice Llewellyn?'

'That's the beauty of it,' the Vicar said with delight. 'In an isolated village like Llanferon whole families have lived in the same spot for generations. Look at the old parish records, for instance.'

Peter nodded. He was quite prepared to look at the parish records, and he was just about to say so. But the Vicar was in full flood now.

'Now you must admit,' he went on briskly, 'that it is quite feasible that old Rice, for instance, is descended from one of those very Welshmen who fought on Carn Eglwys. And the same applies to the other Llanferon people who found the gauntlet. Even more probable in their case. That's incontrovertible,' the Vicar said defiantly, as if he were

expecting Peter to argue the point. 'Incontrovertible!' he repeated, rolling the great syllables round his tongue with relish.

Peter nodded silently. He had no wish to argue. He was perfectly willing to believe the whole theory; it was far too fascinating, quite apart from the fact that he had not the slightest notion of the meaning of incontrovertible.

But Gwyn was more critical.

'But the Frenchman, sir,' he said. 'He had nothing to do with Llanferon.'

The Vicar swung round, his face alight with triumph. This, Peter felt was a thrill, was the real ace of trumps, the one fact that would prove the whole fascinating story.

'Aha, that's just where you're wrong, Gwyn!' the Vicar said. 'That Frenchman's name was Jean de Crespigny. Now,' and he paused dramatically, 'one of the Norman knights who fought up there was a certain Raoul de Crespigny!' He sank back into his chair. 'You see, conclusive! Conclusive!'

It was indeed, and Peter nodded with delight. His brain was filled with wonderful pictures of castle walls, flying pennons, the excited whinny of horses, the bright sheen of armour, and the triumphant flash of sword and shield.

Mr Evans stirred in his chair, and broke the silence.

'But you have forgotten one fact,' he said quietly to the Vicar. 'And it completely explodes your theory.'

The Vicar sat up with a jerk.

'Explodes it, John?' he said. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'You've forgotten that Peter found the gauntlet to-day. And he has never been to Llanferon before. He has no possible connexion with Wales, or with Normandy, or with Carn Eglwys!'

The Vicar stared at Peter in dismay, and his mouth opened in horror.

'Of course,' he muttered. 'Dear me, John, this is a disaster. You're quite right. It does explode my theory.'

He twisted his pipe in his long fingers, and stared miserably at the glowing heart of the fire.

Then Peter broke the silence.

'But I may have a connexion,' he said.

'What connexion, my dear boy?' The Vicar turned to him eagerly.

'I'm half French, sir,' Peter said.

'Why, of course you are!' Gwyn exclaimed. 'Your mother is French, isn't she? She was left that marvellous *château* in Normandy last year.'

'Normandy!' exclaimed the Vicar in rising excitement. 'Now, quick, Peter! What was your mother's name before she was married, and where is the *château*?'

'It's near Bayeux,' Peter said. 'She was left it by her grandfather, the Count de Blois.'

'De Blois!' shouted the Vicar.

His face was shining with excitement, and he wheeled round in his chair, and gestured at Mr Evans, who smiled back in response.

'There you are, John!' the Vicar said. 'The final conclusive clue! That settles it.'

'But why?' Peter asked.

The Vicar beamed at him in delight.

'The leader of the Normans on Carn Eglwys,' he said, 'was Gaston de Blois. It was he who built Carreg Cennen Castle!'