THE GAUNTLET

Ronald Welch

ILLUSTRATED BY

T. R. Freeman

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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 Llandeilo. 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.

Ronald Welch
1951

*Kidwelly Castle is now run by Cadw (2015).

Chapter One

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.'

'OK,' 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 Llewelly 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 today. And he has never been to Llanferon before. He has no possible connection 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 connection,' he said.

'What connection, 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!'

Chapter Two

CARREG CENNEN CASTLE

It was not until after half-past eight that Peter awoke the next morning, and he might have slept even longer if he had not been disturbed by the loud rattle of his window. He rolled over, and sat up. Occasional gusts of rain were driving in through the open window, and with a groan, Peter left his warm bed, and ran across.

It was anything but a pleasant sight outside. Heavy curtains of rain were driving in continuously from the mountains, and then hurling themselves against the old house. The mountains were wreathed in heavy white mist, and Peter shivered in the cold draughts.

He dressed slowly, and wondered what they could do for the rest of the day. The Vicar had pleaded urgent parish

business soon after they had discovered that Peter was a descendant of the de Blois family, but they had arranged that he should meet the two boys at Carreg Cennen Castle after lunch. But there seemed little hope of that now. The rain looked as if it was set for the day.

Eventually Peter and Gwyn spent the morning in the lounge. Gwyn was fully occupied with his stamps, whilst Peter buried himself in some of Mr Evans's books.

By lunchtime he knew a good deal of the history of the Welsh side of the de Blois family. The first of them, the Gaston de Blois who had fought on the mountain, had carved out a large estate for himself, and it had remained in the family until the last of the male de Blois had been killed on the battlefield of Poitiers. The lands had then passed to Lord Roust whose descendants still owned the ruins of Carreg Cennen.

The Vicar put in an appearance soon after eleven, and he picked up the book Peter was reading.

'Castles,' he said. 'I think John and I have been over practically every castle in the country.'

But Peter was not listening.

'I say, sir,' he said. 'Don't you think it would be a good idea if Gwyn and I went up Carn Eglwys on Easter Monday?'

'What?' The Vicar dropped the book, and stared at Peter in alarm. He rubbed his chin, and then shook his head. 'Better not, Peter,' he said. 'Better not.'

'But there's nothing wrong with it, is there?' Peter asked with some surprise.

'Oh, no, of course not,' the Vicar said hastily. 'But there are some things best left alone, you know, my dear boy.'

'There's not a soul in Llanferon who would go up there on Easter Monday,' Mr Evans said.

Peter dropped the subject, but the more he thought about it, the more he was determined to climb Carn Eglwys on the following Monday. But he wisely kept this to himself, and joined Gwyn in making arrangements to meet the Vicar at the castle after lunch.

The rain cleared during lunch, and they reached the castle soon after two. It was not a long walk, but a slow one. They followed the main road, and then went through a gate, and across a field. A rough track led across the field, and then climbed steeply to the gatehouse of the castle. Carreg Cennen was not a large building, and could not have been so before it fell into ruins. There were four round towers at each corner, a line of grey crumbling walls, and a small gatehouse, with small towers on either side. But there was still a good deal standing, so there would be plenty to see, Peter thought.

As they climbed the steep path, Peter began to realize that Carreg Cennen, despite its smallness, was a remarkable castle. He had heard the Vicar describe it as 'the most romantic castle in the country', and he suddenly discovered why. For it was the position of the castle that made it such an amazing building. From where Peter stood now, he could see one solitary farmhouse. The village of Llanferon was around the corner of the road, and out of sight.

There was nothing to be seen except the bare slopes of the mountains, the thin winding road which was seldom used by modern traffic, and then more hills again. Carreg Cennen was the most isolated castle in Wales. The view, Peter realized with a thrill, could not be very different from that which Gaston de Blois would have seen had he stopped his horse at the spot where Peter and Gwyn stood now.

Peter sat down on the short clipped grass at the foot of the gatehouse, and waited for the Vicar. Gwyn was impatient. But Peter was in his element. His imagination could have full play here. Many times he had visited old buildings, and try as he could, he had found it difficult to visualize the scene he wished, for modern towns and buildings had crept up on the walls and windows of most medieval castles and cathedrals. But *here*!

He looked up at the ruined and crumbling gatehouse. If a sentry of 1200 had peered over the wall then, he would have seen the same scene for as far as the eye could reach. Peter wriggled with delight.

'Here he is!' Gwyn said suddenly, and Peter reluctantly came back to the twentieth century.

Coming up the road was an aged car, its engine protesting loudly at the hard work it was being called upon to perform. With a honk on the horn, the Vicar thrust out his right hand, and swerved violently across the road, heading towards the open gate.

'He's going to hit it!' exclaimed Gwyn.

He was right. There was quite a good deal of room, but even that was not enough for the Vicar. He charged through the gate like a tank, and the off-rear mudguard scraped the edge of the gate. But the Vicar was quite unruffled. Without bothering to stop, he swung to the left, and lurched to a halt.

He was climbing out as the boys approached.

'You hit your mudguard, sir,' Peter said.

'That's nothing, Peter,' the Vicar said cheerfully. 'I often do that. No harm done, you see,' he said, and turned to look up at the castle.

'There you are, Peter,' he boomed, waving one hand in the air with a magnificent gesture. 'The home of your ancestors! A positive eagle's nest!' The expression evidently caught his fancy, for he repeated it with great gusto, and in tones that echoed round the field. 'An eagle's nest! Yes, that's exactly what it is.'

He led them briskly through the ruined entrance, and into the main courtyard. There was little to be seen there, for the various buildings that had once stood against the massive outer walls had all gone. There were a few piles of boulders, a line of grey stones to mark the original foundations, but nothing more.

'Here we are,' the Vicar announced. 'You can see the general layout from here. Know anything about castles, either of you?'

Gwyn shook his head. Peter had no chance to do even that, for it was quite clear that the Vicar would have taken

no notice if one of them had stated that he was an expert on the subject. He was well away on the topic of his favourite hobby, and wild horses would not have silenced him now.

'Right!' he said with tremendous satisfaction. 'We'll start with the Normans then . . .' and he was off.

Gwyn sat down on the nearest pile of stones, and Peter after a few seconds, when he realized that the Vicar was likely to carry on for the next ten minutes, followed his example. But whereas Gwyn listened with half his attention only, Peter tried to take in the lecture. But even his enthusiasm was soon swamped by the Vicar's eloquence.

For the old gentleman knew his subject. He took them faithfully through all the stages of castle building, from the simple castle of the Normans to the vast and elaborate fortresses of Edward the First. He spared them no technical term; many-syllabled and mysterious words such as motte and bailey, curtain walls, machicolation, barbicans, drum towers, and concentric lines of defence, flew past the bewildered ears of his audience, and rebounded from the great walls behind them.

'Perfectly simple, you see,' he said at last. 'A gradual and logical evolution from the motte and bailey to the concentric fortress of Caerphilly and Beaumaris. Now, have you got that all quite clearly in your heads?'

He rounded on his audience.

'Er . . . yes, quite clear, thank you, Vicar,' Gwyn said hastily. He had understood one word in ten, but he had

enough sense to realize that if he said anything else, he would merely reopen the flood of eloquence again.

'Good!' the Vicar said. 'Now, come up here, and you'll see something really worth seeing.'

He climbed a half-ruined flight of stairs, and they followed him to the top of the ruined battlements. Peter leant over, shut his eyes quickly and recoiled in horror.

'Pretty good, eh?' boomed the Vicar.

It was more than that. It was astounding. For below was a sheer precipitous drop of three hundred feet. And Peter suddenly realized what the Vicar had meant by the expression 'eagle's nest'.

Carreg Cennen was built on the edge of a great cliff that rose abruptly from the valley. Only one side, that which faced the road, was a gradual rise ; the other sides were formed by that terrifying cliff-face.

Peter gasped, and turned round to look at the gate-house. Why, he thought, they need not have bothered to build any walls at all on three sides; nobody could possibly have climbed that appalling cliff.

'Now, come down here,' the Vicar exclaimed. 'This is unique. Nothing like it in any other castle in the kingdom.'

They followed him down the stairs, across the court-yard, and through a low doorway of stone. Peter found it difficult to believe that there could be anything more astonishing at Carreg Cennen than the cliff, but he was mistaken.

He found himself in a narrow low-roofed tunnel, cut

out of the solid rock of the cliff. Narrow loop-holes had been hacked on one side to light the tunnel.

'What on earth is this, sir?' he asked. 'A secret way out of the castle?'

'Oh, no, nothing as romantic as that,' the Vicar said. 'It's the way to the well and cistern. There it is, you can see it quite distinctly. Filled up and blocked long ago, of course, but there's no doubt about it.'

There was, indeed, no doubt. They could see the wide gaping depression in the floor where the water supply had come from, so necessary to a castle which might have to stand a siege of months without relief.

They spent another half-hour exploring the castle, but there was not a great deal more to be seen. For the wear and tear of centuries had reduced Carreg Cennen to a vast shell; the great curtain walls still towered over the valley, but the interior of the building had vanished, with but faint traces to show where once stood the great hall, the chapel, and the numerous buildings that housed the garrison.

Peter decided, as they drove back to Llanferon with the Vicar, that he would come again, and this time by himself. Gwyn's half-bored interest was distracting, as was the Vicar's booming voice, interesting though he was.

As the car turned the first corner in the winding old road, Peter turned his head, and looked back. Up on its staggering precipice, Carreg Cennen towered in dignified isolation, grim and fascinating, still dominating that lonely

valley, as indeed it had done for the last nine hundred years, and as it probably would for many years to come.

Peter drew a sharp breath. Some curious instinct was tugging at his thoughts. He could not have explained it. He only knew that he must come back to Carreg Cennen.

The Vicar broke in on his thoughts.

'You were impressed with Carreg Cennen, Peter?' he said, glancing for a second at Peter's absorbed expression.

Peter nodded. He was more than impressed, but it was not easy to find the right word.

'Natural, I suppose,' the Vicar went on. 'With your family connection. Remote, of course, but still . . . You must come and see the de Blois tombs in the church.'

'Oh, are there some there, sir?'

'Several. And you can rub the brasses. That's a fascinating hobby.'

'Rubbing brasses?' Peter was puzzled; this was something quite new to him.

They had reached the bottom of the drive leading to Mr Evans's house, and the Vicar pulled up.

'Not heard of brass-rubbing?' he exclaimed. 'My dear boy, you've missed something.'

He was about to deliver one of his lectures, Peter felt, but he was anxious not to miss this particular one. Anything that had any connection with the de Blois family or Carreg Cennen was interesting to him.

'In medieval days,' the Vicar said, 'important people had a large sheet of brass put over their tomb. And a

picture of the dead man was cut in the brass surface. It has lasted, you see, right down to this day, in perfect condition.'

'What about the rubbing, sir?' Peter asked.

'Ah, that's where the fun begins,' the Vicar said with enthusiasm. 'The surface of the brass is rough, you see, after the picture has been cut. If you stretch a piece of special tracing-paper over it, and then rub with a stick of heel-ball, the engraving comes up in a perfect copy. And then you have a lovely specimen of a medieval portrait!'

'It sounds marvellous,' Peter said. 'But it must be pretty difficult to do, sir.'

'Good heavens, no!' the Vicar said. 'I've done hundreds of them, and I can teach you the trick in a few minutes. Like to have a shot?'

Peter nodded. He certainly would like to try.

'Good! You'll learn something of history, too. With a good collection of brass rubbings, you can trace the whole history of medieval dress. Take armour, for instance.'

Peter was quite prepared to take armour. It was a subject that had always fascinated him.

'With brasses of armour,' the Vicar exclaimed, 'you can follow the complete evolution of armour from the chain mail of the Normans, down to the elaborate plate armour of the late Plantagenets.'

He was in full flight now, and Peter and Gwyn listened dumbly to the stream of technical words; they were out of their depth in a few seconds, but that was beyond the

Vicar's notice. He spoke of camail, salades, bascinets, hauberks, vambraces, demi-brassarts, jambarts, and so on, until Peter's brain was numbed with the flow of curious names, half English, half Norman.

But the Vicar moved gleefully on to maces, battle-axes, visors, misericordes, and tilting haumes, finishing up with a short conducted tour of the collection of armour in the Tower of London, and a few bitter remarks about the invention of firearms that had brought the great days of chivalry to an end.

The last war, they gathered from the Vicar, was a drab and uninteresting affair. If General Montgomery had landed in Normandy clad in full plate armour, the Vicar would have taken a great deal more interest in the campaign.

'All that quite clear?' demanded the Vicar.

'Well, fairly, sir,' Peter said.

'I wonder. Well, see you tomorrow, then. Ten o'clock at the Vicarage, and I'll take you both across to the church.'

Peter walked up the drive in silence, while Gwyn chattered about the castle. Peter was wondering ruefully if he would ever be able to learn anything about the subject of armour. It sounded horribly complicated, and it was a subject he would love to understand.

He little knew then how familiar he would become with all those elaborate technical expressions that the Vicar had used. How could he have guessed?