

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BATTLE OF YSTRAD OWEN, GLAMORGAN, A.D. 1032

IN the summer of 1032, one of the most momentous battles in the history of Wales was fought at Ystrad Owen, a few miles inland from the town of Cowbridge, "Glamorgan's fair village," between the Glamorgans and invading Saxons, marching up from the Severn at Aberthawen, called Nant Dawen in ancient Glamorgan records. From the scene of the battle to the Channel is about six miles, so it is seen the enemy came a dangerous distance inland on this occasion. The six miles is a broad, undulating, green valley, with the green country rolling back on both sides into the Bro Morganwg, or Campania, of Glamorgan. At Ystrad Owen the land in front of the advance rises rather abruptly, and high up on its front is Ash Hall, associated with Captain Gronow, of Waterloo Sketches fame. Below on the east of this hill the highway flanks it, and runs on to Llantrisant Great Western Railway station, a few miles farther. On the west of it another road runs over its shoulder to meet the highway running from the town of Llantrisant through Llan-Arawn ("Llanharran") towards the west.

On the summit of the lofty hill on the south, and facing Ash Hall, is the site of Talyvan Castle, where Cynan ap Seisyllt dwelt. A mile to the west of Ash Hall is the site of Brigant Castle, where Morgan the Aged dwelt and died. In the hollow of the entire district, close to the highway, stands Ystrad Owen Parish Church, flanked on its western side by the Dawen Mound of Druidism, where were interred King Owen, son of Morgan the Aged, and his queen, and father of King Ithel, who died in 994. Ystrad Owen

Church is on the point of a triangle described by the two highways right and left mentioned.

In 1032 a farmhouse called Trev-Esyllt, now Beaupre, stood between Cowbridge and the Channel. It was then the home of the Seisyllts (Cecils). Let the reader avoid confounding this castle with that of Denis Powys, then called Maes Esyllt. On his marriage with Princess Denis of Powys, Prince Jestyn received from King Gwrgan, his father, Maes Esyllt aforesaid, and he built there a castle, and named it after his wife.

The preceding archdeacon, Lord Blegwryd Seisyllt, left sons, viz. Robert, Aeddau, Cynan, Llewelyn (married Princess Angharad, daughter of Meredith, King of West Wales). Howel was killed in Anglesey in A.D. 1021. Cynan had two gallant sons, who lived with him at Talyvan Castle, and mentioned above.

One morning, in the year 1032, the whole of the district was startled by the thrilling tidings that a vast army of Saxons were disembarking from their innumerable war-galleys at the Lays and Aberthawen. The entire country was quickly roused into feverish action, and we infer there were trumpeters on horses galloping towards the town of Llantrisant and other directions calling "To arms!" Every man of Glamorgan was then a trained warrior, expert bowman, and thrower of barbed darts. Lord Cynan was quickly at the head of affairs. His eldest brother, Robert, was on the Wye River with a strong force, prepared to resist a threatened Saxon invasion from that direction, which, however, was nothing but a diversion to draw the forces of Glamorgan, to leave central Glamorgan undefended against this landing at Aberthawen.

The first act Cynan adopted was to throw up a long line of trenches (still there) on the reverse side of the hill upon which Ash Hall now stands, which trenches describe the base of a raised triangle, the two roads describing its sides and the church below its point. It was a masterly stroke that throwing up of trenches, for, owing to the absence of so many fighting men of Glamorgan with Lord Robert, far off on the Wye, it was obvious that those

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remaining would only be able to act on the defensive until others would, by forced marches, have time to return here. Hundreds busily delved at the task of throwing up the trenches, extending from road to road. As the news of the invasion travelled inland, from innumerable farm houses on the hills issued gallant fathers and sons of Glamorgan. From heroic Llantrisant they came at a bounding pace; the Rhondda sent forth its best; and along the Ely Valley footmen and horsemen must have come rapidly; and through Llan "Harran" and Llan Sanor, and by Croes Van, came the sons of Pendeulwyn, Pentyrch, and St. Fagans. As they arrived, officers in the two roads directed them to go behind the busily thrown up trenches and assist.

All this time the enemy was disembarking at the broad Lays and at Aberthawen, a little farther inland, at the mouth of the Dawen River. Fancy beholds them forming in order of battle to sweep up by way of Cowbridge. By noon they were doubtless at Cowbridge, and now, having ascertained the unexpected rally in their front, they came on cautiously and slowly through Aber-Rhuthyn and Maendy, in the direction of Ystrad Owen. They soon descried Lord Cynan and his two gallant sons, who had only just returned home from the battle of Machwy, near Llechryd, Builth, after the fall of Meredith and the escape of Howel, his brother. They saw the three and other commanders on the brow of Ash Hall Hill watching their advance. But the Saxons must have been wondering where the resisting army was. They must have thought they were all on the Wye with Lord Robert, and all the forces of West Wales near St. David's, opposing a similar diversion by Saxons, with a like object in view which their brethren on the west bank of the Wye had.

The Saxons little suspected then that on the reverse side of Ash Hall the Glamorgan clans were most rapidly mustering for the fray, and to bar their farther progress into fair Morganwg.

It was impossible for the Saxons to advance any farther by either of the two roads which we compare to the sides

of a triangle without incurring the great peril from both cavalry and foot deploying from the reverse of the trenches after them, and cutting off their retreat should that become necessary. Upon those green fields near Ystrad Owen Church must have stood the greatly perplexed Saxon commanders. The only thing they could do was to attempt to take the trenches in front. The thing was impossible, for the archers lining the trenches commanded the brow of the ridge, and they never missed their marks! While this hesitation continued, it seems Lord Cynan decided to assume the aggressive, and, ordering some of his men to take the two roads on either flank of the advance trenches, descend in two columns into the plain, and then attack from two opposite directions the Saxons' two flanks, while the main body, under him and his sons, poured over the centre brow of the ridge, and made for the point of the triangle by the church below in their front.

The trumpets of Glamorgan sounded "Prepare to charge!" Then came the onset, Glamorgan racing to the brow of the hill, and then they poured down the slope in the direction of the church, while their comrades advanced along the two opposite directions upon the Saxon flanks. Thus the most fierce conflict took place in the flat fields around the church and the adjacent Dawen Mound. But here, alas! fell the heroic Lord Cynan and his two gallant sons, doubtless fighting desperately by the side of their father. Their fall must have sent the men of Glamorgan into frenzy, and great many fair-skinned Saxons fell that afternoon and evening beneath their spears and battle-axes. The shades of night were falling fast, and we are informed by Caradoc of Llancarvan, hostilities ceased for the night.

Now, the ascending hillside opposite is still called Bryn-Y-Llengau, or "Hillside of the Legions." It thus appears the Glamorgans forced the Saxons up that hillside before them, and that hostilities then ceased. The name, "Hillside of the Legions," conveys that the Saxons were very numerous, otherwise the name "Legions" would not

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have been applied to them. It appears that in the silence and darkness of the summer night the Saxons ascended higher up the Talyvan Hill, and escaped over its summit into what is called Cae Câd-dy, or the "House of the Field of Battle."

The Saxons knew that in a few hours their enemy would receive great additions to their numbers. As it was, they had barely saved themselves from annihilation. They had saved themselves only by ascending that hillside. What, then, of the morrow, when the Britons below would have been joined by thousands of fresh troops, fresh in a double sense? There was also the thought, which must have caused anxiety all day, namely, the extreme probability that another Welsh division might march after them from the direction of Cowbridge and attack their rear. A retreat over the hills and avoid the plain between Ystrad Owen and Cowbridge was decided upon, and was acted upon immediately.

The Saxons now passed farther over the hills in their rear and came to a halt at Llan-cwywan, and at once proceeded in their turn to entrench themselves. This fact proves the Saxons did not consider themselves hopelessly beaten, for in that case they would have endeavoured during the night to regain their ships at Aberthawen, unless, indeed, the road to Cowbridge was already barred against them. That was probably the case.

At the break of day on the morrow, Lord Robert Seisyllt (Cecil) arrived on the scene of carnage—of the dying and the dead. Probably the bodies of his valiant brother and his sons had been conveyed inside the little church of Ystrad Owen close by. It is stated by Caradoc of Llan-carvan, who must have had the particulars from grandsons of men who had been present at the battle, that Lord Robert here made a speech to his army, probably from the summit of the mound west of the church. It was in the vernacular Welsh. He encouraged the warriors by reminding them of their past achievements. In a short time the Glamorgan men were in cadres lines on the march, going with swinging tread in the direction of the Saxon

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trenches at Llanwywan. The Saxons were soon well-nigh surrounded by their fierce enemies.

Presently Lord Robert Seisyllt appears to have directed his impatient army to storm the crowded Saxon trenches, and they did so with such fierceness that the Saxons, after a brief resistance, broke away and ran for their lives down towards their ships.

The route they took is still called Gyrva'r Lladron, *anglice*, "Robbers' Run." It was a terrible scene that must have then ensued; thousands of foreigners running for their lives for their ships, followed and intermixed by horsemen with busy battle-axes, and infantry with spears and shields, equally busy on Saxon heads and bodies. On the green route towards Aberthawen the ground narrows and is known as King's Land. At that place was built in recent years a railway station, which is called St. Mary Church. While Mr. W. H. Mathias's men were digging the foundation for the station, a large number of skeletons with broken skulls were dug up.