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Grail

Book 5 of the Pendragon Cycle

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

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GRAIL

book₅ of the PENDRAGON cycle

STEPHEN R.
LAWHEAD



LION FICTION

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PROLOGUE

Men are such pathetic, lumpen things – so predictable in their appetites, such slaves to their tedious desires and pleasures. Creatures of dull habit and savage compulsion, they waver between one and the other, never perceiving anything of the world beyond their animal passions. Why, the cattle of the field know more of life.

Ah, but it is all too easy. I have long since tired of their trivial ambitions and endeavours. Ignorant brutes, they deserve every misfortune their beast of a god can rain down upon them.

Where is real strength? Where is true courage? Where is genuine discipline harnessed to uncompromising volition, and both allied in total harmony, each subject to the other? Where are such treasures to be found?

On the battlefield, in the heat of the fight? Ha! That is what men think, and as in all else they are vastly mistaken. War is children with dirty faces squabbling over the dungheap. In war, life – that single most precious substance in the universe – is bartered cheap, thrown away, wasted, traded for a prize which will not last beyond the changing of the seasons. Fools, all of them! Blind, ignorant fools – it is pure joy tormenting them.

Only that which endures beyond time is worth having.

Well I know it. I, who have given all for the mastery of time and the elements, know the value of life. Truly, truly, I have spent my life on the things that endure. Not for nothing am I called the Queen of Air and Darkness.

ONE

I, Gwalchavad, Lord of Orcady, write this. And no gentle labour it is. Nor less rough the reading, I fear. Unlike Myrddin, or the brown-cloaked clerics, I am no master of the scribbler's craft. God's truth, the sword hilt better fits my hand than this close-pared reed. Even so, I am assured my crabbed script will live long after the hand that framed it is dust. This Brother Aneirin assures me, and he is wise in such things. So be it.

I was born in sight of Ynys Prydein, with my brother and twin, Gwalcmai – both sons of noble Lot, himself a king of the Orcades. My birth, in itself, is of small consequence. But for Arthur, I would have lived all my days in that wild place and never travelled beyond the boundary stones of my father's island realm; but for Arthur, my life might have passed in hunting, fishing, and settling the squabbles of petty chieftains. I would never have heard of the Kingdom of Summer – much less the Grail – and truly, I would not be writing this at all.

Still, I will persist in my endeavour so you may know the way of it. Anyone with ears has heard of Arthur and his trials and triumphs; tales and more tales flood the land from Lloegres to Celyddon. Many bards tell them now, and a few of the monkish kind have written them, too. A sorry scribe I may be, though perhaps not least among these gall-stained ink-spillers.

They speak of wars and battles, and that is right. They tell of brave men defending the Island of the Mighty with their lives. These tales are good, and some are even true; I take nothing away from them. But my task is ordered differently.

See, now, it is the Grail I tell: that strange stirrer of marvels, that most uncanny vessel of desire. Dangerous, yes, and more beautiful than words alone can tell, it is the holiest treasure in all this worlds-realm. But for Arthur, that precious cup would surely have been forgotten, and its healing virtues lost through ignorance and neglect.

Yet, truth be told, but for Arthur, none of the terrors and tribulations I describe would have befallen us. But for Arthur, the Grail was almost lost, and a flame of heaven's pure fire extinguished on the earth.

That is a tale few have heard, and it is worth more than all the others. Ah, but I race before myself. Know you, the Battlehost of the Ancient Enemy is large, and falters before nothing save the True Word. And the sound of the clash when those two combatants met will echo through the ages, I do believe it. Blessed among men, I was favoured to ride at my king's right hand in the foreranks of the fight. Tremble and turn pale; sain yourself with runes and strong prayers, call upon the company of angels, and harken well to my warning: where great good endures, great evil gathers close about. This I know.

Hear me! Speak of the Grail and you speak a mystery with a secret at its heart, and I, Gwalchavad, Prince of Orcady, know the secret as none other. If the telling gives you pleasure, well and good but I should not like cold eyes to read it in this book.

Therefore, look to your heart; look long and hard. If you are friend to all that is true and right, then welcome and read on. But if you would savour the sauce of slander and shadow tricks, feast on lies, betrayals, and seductions, you will find little to your liking here. Blessed Jesu, I mean to tell the truth of what I know.

Thus, I begin:

For seven long years we warred against the ravaging Saecsens – seven years of hardship and privation, misery, torment, and death. Under Arthur's command, and with the aid of the Swift Sure Hand, we prevailed in the end. This is well known – indeed, even small children know how the warhost of Britain raised the wall on Baedun Hill and destroyed the bold invader – so I will not say more, except to point out that we had scarcely drawn breath from our hard-fought victory at Baedun when we were beset by the wandering Vandal horde. Fighting first in Ierna, then in Britain, we chased Amilcar, that greedy boar of battle, over most of Lloegres before he was subdued.

A strange war, that; it lasted little more than a season, yet brought more waste and destruction to our land than all the Saecsen battles put together. Why is it that trouble always seems to come in threes? For

with the havoc of the Vandali came plague and drought as well. Those who grumble and complain would do well to remember that the Pendragon had three enemies to fight, not just one. If there is another king who could have done better against such odds, then show me that man, I say, or shut your mouth. There is no pleasing some people. Though many raise their voices in accusation and make loud lament over lost lands and such, I still think Arthur chose the better course.

The thing is over now, in any event, so it does no good to piss and moan. If they knew the Bear of Britain at all, they would realize their miserable whining only hardens his conviction the more.

Better a trustworthy foe than a treacherous friend, and we have seen enough of scheming friends. The Island of the Mighty is better off without the likes of Ceredig, Morcant, Brastias, Gerontius, Urien, and their rebellious ilk always making trouble. The Devil take them all, I say. They will not be missed.

Where were they – those who make such loud complaint – when Arthur stood against the Vandal lord? Urien and Brastias thought to usurp the High King's portion, but did I hear them offer to take the High King's place on the blood-soaked battleground? Gerontius was ever quick to goad the others in their petty rebellion, but did I see bold Gerontius in the forefront of the fight?

No, I did not.

We had amassed the greatest warhost seen in Britain since Great Constantine – twenty thousand men and fifteen thousand horses! Yet, on that fearful day Arthur faced his foe alone, and the treasonous lords were nowhere to be seen. Well, they made their choice. So be it. But instead of insulting heaven with their lament, they would do better to offer heartfelt praise that they possess both breath and tongue to complain.

Arthur paid dearly for the peace we now enjoy. When they carried him from the field of battle, so, too, were our hearts borne away – and the sun and stars as well, for we walked in darkness without Arthur.

'They have taken him to Ynys Avallach,' Rhys said, his face grey with fatigue and worry. 'If you know any prayers, say them now.' For if Arthur would be healed, it must be in that holy place and none other.

The Wise Emrys knew best what to do. Rhys then delivered Arthur's last command. 'You are to conduct the Vandali to the north, where they will take possession of lands surrendered by the rebel lords. Any Britons living in these realms will be cast out and their settlements made forfeit by their lords' treason.'

Thus they departed, leaving us to establish the peace Arthur had won. We divided the warhost; Bedwyr, Cai, and I conducted the new Vandal chieftain, Mercia, and his tribes to the lands Arthur had granted them in the north. Cador and the rest of the Cymbrogi – the name is Arthur's choice, it means companions of the heart – turned their attention to overseeing the departure from these shores of the traitors and their followers whose lands had fallen forfeit.

Burdened by weight of numbers, and fatigued with all the fighting we had endured, we made our way north very slowly, leading the Vandal host, searching out water along the way. Far easier said than done, I fear; with each passing day the drought deepened, causing hardship from one end of the land to the other. It broke my heart to see holding after holding deserted – many had fled to Armorica – but worse still were the burned-out strongholds, those which plague had ravaged and destroyed.

If the sight of so much suffering made us heart-heavy, the thought of displacing honest British folk from their homelands brought us to despair. Oh, it is a hard, hard thing to tell a man his home must be surrendered and all his life's labour has come to naught because his rogue of a lord has broken faith with the High King. Stab that man in the heart; it is kinder in the end, I swear it.

I loathed the task set before me, and prayed for a way to evade what must be done. Day after day, as we moved the Vandal host northward, I prayed to God for a miracle.

Behold! My prayer was answered, not with a miracle, but with a resolution almost as good. One night, the sixth or seventh since leaving our encampment near the battlefield at Caer Gloiu, Mercia and his priest approached Bedwyr's tent. Bedwyr had brought Arthur's camp chair and tent as the sole, scant consolation of a miserable journey. We were enjoying a moment's rest after another arduous day.

'What do they want now?' growled Bedwyr.

Like Bedwyr, I desired nothing more than to end this day of heat and dust in good company. ‘I will deal with them,’ I said, thinking to send them away; I stood to call out.

‘Stay, brother.’ Bedwyr sighed, changing his mind. ‘As we have not had more than a dusty glimpse of them for a day or two, we had better allow him his say.’

Swarthy Mercia, dark hair and eyes – darker still in the fading twilight – hailed us with his customary salute, striking his heart with his fist. The once-captive priest, Hergest, spoke when Mercia spoke, saying, ‘Greetings, friends.’

‘Greetings,’ Bedwyr replied bleakly. After days of herding Vandali, he was finding it hard to muster any enthusiasm for their concerns.

‘Sit down if you will,’ I said, making a gesture towards courtesy. ‘We would offer you a cup to wet your throats on such a sultry day, but we have nothing to put in it.’ I said this last to discourage the appeal I knew was coming. Every day since the beginning of this journey, one or another of the barbarian chieftains had come before us to demand a greater water ration – sometimes two or three on the same day. What little water we had shared out to all in equal measure, as I told them – each and every day.

‘It is hot, yes,’ said Mercia. His speech, though broken, was rapidly improving. No doubt Hergest was a good teacher.

‘Yes,’ Bedwyr answered, leaning back in his chair. ‘We need rain – the land needs rain.’

‘My people thirst,’ Mercia said bluntly.

Bedwyr reacted irritably. ‘Am I a fountain? I just said we need rain. It is a drought, you know. Everyone is thirsty.’

Mercia gazed mildly back, undisturbed by this outburst. He glanced at Hergest, who uttered a few harsh-sounding words in his own tongue. The Vandal merely nodded and loosed a lengthy torrent of barbarian jabber.

When he finished, he nodded again, this time to the priest, who said, ‘Lord Mercia wants you both to know that he would be less than noble if he did not ask for water when his people are thirsty. He intended no disrespect.’

‘Very well,’ Bedwyr muttered, somewhat chastened by his reply.

‘Mercia also says that he is unhappy,’ continued Hergest. Before Bedwyr or I could frame a reply, the priest said, ‘The source of his unhappiness is this: rooting Britons from their homes sits ill with him. To be the cause of such hardship does make him seem small in his own eyes.’

‘I understand,’ Bedwyr told him, ‘but there is nothing to be done. The hardship to the Britons has come about by the wilful action of their lords who broke faith with Arthur. The punishment is shared by all. That is the High King’s command.’

When the stalwart priest had conveyed my meaning, Mercia answered. ‘I quarrel not with Arthur’s judgment. But I would offer a – ah, an understanding,’ he said, speaking through Hergest.

‘Yes?’ asked Bedwyr warily. ‘What is this understanding?’

‘Allow us to settle unclaimed lands,’ suggested Mercia through his priest. ‘Let stay who will, but tell them we will not possess inhabited British holdings.’

This was unforeseen. ‘And let Britons and Vandali live together in the same realm?’ I asked.

‘If any care to stay,’ Hergest answered. ‘The Vandal would share the land with any willing to share the land with them.’

‘Is he earnest?’ Bedwyr inquired, pulling on his chin.

‘Indeed.’ Hergest assured us adamantly. ‘He has spoken to the other chieftains, and they all agree. They would rather settle the wilderness than displace the innocent.’ He paused. ‘May I explain?’

‘If you can.’

‘It is this way,’ said Hergest. ‘Arthur’s generosity is more than they expected and it has shamed them. The people of Vandalia are a proud race, and resourceful. Because need is great, they will accept the land Arthur has decreed for them, but their pride recoils from causing hardship to the kinsmen of those who have befriended them.’

I shook my head in amazement. ‘Hardship? Blessed Jesu, only a few days ago these bloodlusting barbarians were plundering and burning these same British settlements!’

‘That,’ Mercia spat, ‘was Amilcar’s doing.’ Obviously, there was little love between the defeated Vandal king and his minions.

‘And is Mercia so very different?’ Bedwyr asked harshly, pressing the matter, I think, to see what sort of man the new king might be.

Without hesitation, the priest replied. ‘Mercia regrets the plundering and burning that Amilcar inflicted on this land. It was war. Such things happen. But now that Mercia is lord of the Vandali, Hussae, and Rögatti, he has pledged friendship with Arthur. This friendship he values greatly, and would increase its worth by extending it to the Britons holding the lands wherein the Vandal tribes must settle.’

I was amazed. The suggestion showed both benevolence and shrewdness. The cunning I might have expected, but the compassion in the barbarian’s suggestion took me by surprise. I looked at Bedwyr, who looked at me, rubbing the back of his neck.

Hergest saw our hesitation. ‘Mercia does not ask that you trust him – only that you try him.’

‘It is not a matter of trust,’ Bedwyr said slowly. ‘The summer is far advanced; there is no time to raise crops before winter comes. You will require dwellings, and cattle pens, and everything else. Where will you get them, if not from the Britons?’

When the priest had explained Bedwyr’s words to him, the young chieftain smiled. ‘We are not without skill in such matters,’ he replied through Hergest. ‘Besides, the wise ones among us say that this winter shall be like those of our homeland in the southern sea. It will do us no harm.’

‘Winter in the north is harsh and long,’ Bedwyr told him, ‘as I know only too well.’

‘Your concern does you honour, Lord Bedwyr,’ Hergest answered. ‘But would not homeless Britons suffer the winter as readily as homeless Vandali?’ He lifted a hand to Mercia. ‘My lord says that if we are to live under Arthur’s rule, let it be among Arthur’s people.’

The young chieftain’s eyes shifted from Bedwyr to me, and back again – willing us to believe.

I regarded him carefully, uncertain what to do. Truly, they offered us a way out of the hateful task of forcing people from their homes

– countrymen whose only sin was having unfaithful noblemen for lords. What would Arthur do?

I was on the point of sending them away to allow us to think the thing through when Mercia said, ‘Lord Bedvyr... Lord Galahad’ – that was as much as he could make of our names – ‘please, I beg you, let us prove the trust that has been granted us.’

‘Very well,’ Bedvyr said, making up his mind at once. ‘Let it be as you say. We will conduct you to unclaimed lands and there you shall make your home. I leave it to you how to divide the realms between your tribes. Make your settlements as you will. But there is to be no trouble between your people and the Britons who choose to remain.’

He said this sternly, every word an implied threat. Mercia rushed forward, knelt before him, seized his hand, and kissed it. No doubt this was a common thing among the Vandal kind, but we are not so accustomed. Bedvyr snatched his hand away, saying, ‘Rise, Mercia. You have the thing you seek. Go and tell your people.’

Mercia rose and stood a little apart, smiling his good pleasure. ‘A wise decision, Prince Bedvyr,’ Hergest assured us; he touched a hand to his throat and I noticed he no longer wore the iron slave ring.

‘Make certain I do not live to regret it.’

‘The Vandali are barbarians, it is true. They give their word rarely, but when they do, the vow endures to the fifth generation,’ the priest affirmed. ‘I trust Mercia.’

‘May God be good to you,’ Bedvyr told him. ‘I am content.’

‘I am heartily glad you are content,’ I told Bedvyr when they had gone. ‘I only wonder what Arthur will say when he hears what we have done.’

‘I care nothing for that,’ replied Bedvyr. He turned away quickly, adding, ‘I pray instead he lives to hear it.’

TWO

Bedwyr retreated to the tent, but I remained outside, thinking, and listening to the sounds of the camp settling in for the night. Twilight deepened around me. I watched the dusky slope of the distant hillside begin to glow as campfires wakened in the darkness; soon the aroma of roasting meat stirred me.

What has become of Rhys? I wondered, thinking that he should have returned long ago.

He and a small company of warriors had gone in search of water as soon as we halted our day's march. We were camped in a shallow valley, and there were streams in the surrounding hills. Finding water had become the chief task of each and every day; we did not neglect any possible means of filling the waterskins and jars. As we moved farther up the vale, the streams narrowed and thinned, and the search became more difficult. We had not located any drinking water this day, so Rhys had undertaken to continue looking.

The rest of the Cymbrogi were nearby, having established camp at a second place on the hillside. We did this by way of guarding the Vandal host, yet allowing ourselves a ready retreat. For though they were no longer armed – their spears alone filled three wagons! – there were so many of them that we could easily be overrun. Thus, we always made two camps a short distance apart and kept watch through the night.

'He will soon return,' Bedwyr assured me when I pointed out that it was well past dark and still no sign of Rhys and his company. 'Why uneasy, brother?'

'How much water remains?' The Cymbrogi also stood guard over the water wagons, lest anyone try to steal another share.

'One day at full rations,' he replied; he had already reckoned the amount. 'We could go on half rations, but I would rather wait until Rhys returns to make that decision.'

I left him to his rest, and returned to the campfire feeling uneasy and troubled – though I could not think why. Perhaps I was merely tired. It seemed like years since I had slept more than two nights in the same place... years since I had slept without a weapon in my hand. Once Mercia and his folk were settled, I thought, we will begin to enjoy the peace we have all fought so long to achieve.

A pale phantom moon rose and soared like a silent spectre over the narrow valley. I supped on something tough and tasteless – stewed saddle, perhaps – and finished the last of my day's ration of water. I retreated to the tent and lay down, but found the closeness inside stifling; so I took up the oxhide and stretched out on the ground a short distance away – whereupon I found I could not sleep for the barking of the camp dogs. I lay on my back with my arms folded over my chest, gazing up at the heavens, marking the slow progression of the moon, and wondering if the mutts were always so loud.

I lay a long time before realizing that I was listening for Rhys' return. I identified all the night sounds of the camp – horses whickering and jittery at their pickets, the tight voices of the sentries as they moved along the boundary, the far-off call of a night bird in a distant tree – all familiar, yet made peculiar by my listening. Or perhaps it was something else – something in the air making them seem that way.

I must have dozed without knowing it, for when I looked again, the moon was well down. I heard the short, sharp challenge of a sentry, and the expected reply. I rose at once and made my way to the picket line to see Rhys and his band dismounting. Some of the men swayed on their feet, exhausted by their long search.

'Good hunting?' I called, hurrying to join them.

Rhys turned when he heard me. The look on his face halted me in my steps. 'Rhys?'

He tossed a quick command over his shoulder and then stepped near. 'We found a spring,' he said, his voice husky and strange. Perhaps it was merely fatigue, but I have seen terror often enough to recognize its many guises, and I thought Rhys wore it now.

'A spring, yes,' I said, searching the steward's face for a sign. 'Good. Well done. Is it far?'