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Arthur

Book 3 of the Pendragon Cycle

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

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ARTHUR

book₃ of the PENDRAGON cycle

STEPHEN R.
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LION FICTION

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PROLOGUE

Vortipor! Foremost in corruption, supreme in spite! A pig with its snout sunk in the entrails of its rival is not swifter than you to suck down iniquity. Your wickedness flows from your smoke-filled hall and inundates the land in a vile flood of wrongdoing.

You call yourself noble. You call yourself king. You call yourself exalted. Exalted in sin, perhaps. You have wreathed your head with laurel, but this is not deserved – unless men now bestow the laurel crown for immorality, at which you are a champion among men!

Urien Rheged! Your name is a reproach. Fornicator! Adulterer! Chief Despoiler! Pillar of Impurity! The lowest vermin in your refuse pit is not lower than you.

Chief Drunkard! Chief Glutton! Defiling all you touch. To you is given the depravity of ten, the iniquity of a hundred, the perversion of a thousand! Your chancrous body is bloated with your corruption. You are dead and do not know it, but the stench of your corpse rises to heaven!

Maelgwn! Great Hound of Gwynedd! How far have you fallen from your father's high position. Maelgwn the Tall earned his stature through righteousness and virtue; you steal it from his memory. Is it possible that you have forgotten all that you once knew?

You have seized the kingship by murder and rapine. For this you call yourself Chief Dragon of the Island of the Mighty. You think to wrap yourself in another man's glory, but it has become a shroud of infamy to you. Pendragon! May eternal shame devour you for your presumption.

Yet, there was once a king worthy of that name. That king was Arthur.

It is the paramount disgrace of this evil generation that the name of that great king is no longer spoken aloud except in derision. Arthur!

He was the fairest flower of our race, Cymry's most noble son, Lord of the Summer Realm, Pendragon of Britain. He wore God's favour like a purple robe.

Hear then, if you will, the tale of a true king.

book 1

PELLEAS

ONE

Arthur is no fit king. Uther's bastard, Merlin's pawn, he is lowborn and a fool. He is wanton and petty and cruel. A glutton and a drunkard, he lacks all civilized graces. In short, he is a sullen, ignorant brute.

All these things and more men say of Arthur. Let them.

When all the words are spoken and the arguments fall exhausted into silence, this single fact remains: we would follow Arthur to the very gates of hell and beyond if he asked it. And that is the solitary truth.

Show me another who can claim such loyalty.

'*Cymbrog?*', he calls us: companions of the heart, fellow-countrymen.

Cymbrog! We are his strong arm, his shield and spear, his blade and helm. We are the blood in his veins, the hard sinew of his flesh, the bone beneath the skin. We are the breath in his lungs, the clear light in his eyes, and the song rising to his lips. We are the meat and drink at his board.

Cymbrog! We are earth and sky to him. And Arthur is all these things to us – and more.

Ponder this. Think long on it. Only then, perhaps, will you begin to understand the tale I shall tell you.

How not? Who, besides the Emrys himself, knows as much as I? Though I am no bard, I am worthy. For I know Arthur as few others do; we are much alike, after all. We are both sons of uncertain birth, both princes unacknowledged by our fathers, both forced to live our lives apart from clan and kin.

My father was Belyn, Lord of Llyonesse. My mother was a serving woman in the king's house. I learned early that I would receive nothing from my father's hand and must make my own way in the world.

I was little more than a boy when Myrddin agreed to make me his steward, but I have regretted not one day. Even through those

long years of his madness, when I searched the hidden ways of wide Celyddon alone, I desired nothing but to be once more what I had been: servant and companion to Myrddin Emrys, Chief Bard in the Island of the Mighty.

I, Pelleas, prince of Llyonesse, will tell all as I have seen it... And I have seen much indeed.

‘Are you certain, Myrddin?’ Arthur whispers, anxiously. ‘Everyone is watching. What if it will not work?’

‘It will, as you say, “work”. Just do as I have told you.’

Arthur nods grimly, and steps up to the great keystone where the sword stands, its naked blade stuck fast in the heart of the stone.

The yard is mostly empty now. Those going in to Urbanus’ mass have done so. It is cold, the day dwindling towards dusk. A few small snowflakes drift out of the darkening sky, to fall on the flagged stone pavement at our feet. Our breath hangs in clouds above our heads.

It is the eve of the Christ Mass, and the lords of Britain have come to Londinium to hold council – as they do nearly every year – to essay who among them might become High King.

Fifteen years have come and gone since the sword was first placed there. Now the once-fine steel is rusted, the stone weathered and stained. But the eagle-carved amethyst in the hilt still glows, its imperial fire undiminished.

Macsen Wledig’s sword it is. The Sword of Britain. Emperor Maximus once owned the sword – and Constantine, Constans, Aurelius, and Uther after him, each in his turn High King of Britain.

Yes, fifteen years have come and gone since that first council. Fifteen years of darkness and unceasing strife, of dissent, disappointment and defeat. Fifteen years in which the Saecens have grown strong once more. Fifteen years for a boy to grow to manhood.

A young man now, he stands grim-faced gazing at the sword thrust deep into the stone... hesitant, uncertain.

‘Take it, Arthur,’ Merlin tells him. ‘It is your right.’

Arthur reaches slowly for the bronze hilt. His hand shakes. Cold? Fear? A little of both, perhaps.

He grasps the hilt and glances at Merlin, who nods silently. He drops his eyes and draws a breath, taking courage, steeling himself for whatever will happen.

Arthur's fingers tighten on the silver-braided hilt: see how naturally it fits his hand! He pulls.

The Sword of Britain slides from its stone sheath. The ease with which this is accomplished shines in the wonder in Arthur's eyes. He truly cannot believe what he has done. Nor can he comprehend what it means.

'Well done, Arthur.' Merlin steps to the stone beside him, and Arthur, without thinking, offers the sword to him. 'No, son,' he says gently, 'truly, it is yours.'

'What should I do?' Arthur's voice is unsteady, rising. 'Myrddin, you must tell me what to do! Else I am lost.'

Merlin places a calming hand on Arthur's shoulder. 'Why do you fear, my son? I have ever been with you. God willing, it will always be so.' They turn together and walk into the church.

Yes, we have ever been with him, it is true. I cannot remember a day when we were not. Even so, it is difficult... difficult to believe that the young man standing on the threshold of the church has not simply stepped full-grown from out of a hollow hill, or an enchanted pool in Celyddon Forest.

That Arthur has not always existed seems odd to me. Like the wind on the moors and the wild winter stars, surely he has always lived... and always will.

Arthur, with his keen blue eyes and hair of burnished gold, his ready smile and guileless countenance. Wide and heavy of shoulder, long of limb, he towers above other men and, though he does not yet know the power of his stature, he is aware that smaller men become uneasy near him. He is handsomely knit in all; fair to look upon.

The native brashness of the northern hills clings to him still. He is like an untamed colt brought into the company of humankind: curious, wary, eager to discover the source of the strange delights that rouse his senses. He is green and untried, but ripe with the promise of greatness.

When he enters a hall the eye travels naturally to him. Those who hunt with him find themselves contesting who shall ride at his right hand. Already, he draws men to him; that is his birthright.

‘Go on, Arthur,’ Merlin urges, as Arthur hesitates on the threshold. ‘It is time.’

I do not possess a prophet’s vision; I cannot see what will be. But, at my master’s words, I see once more all that has gone before this moment... see now Arthur as I first saw him.

A near-naked babe, wearing nothing but a short, dirty sark, his long yellow locks well tangled with leaves and bits of straw, he stumbled forth on legs like little stumps, blue eyes merry with infant mischief. In each chubby fist he grasped a half-grown cat.

A mere babe, but he clutched those two grey cats by their necks in his grip and held them dangling above the ground. Hissing, spitting, writhing mad, they scratched at his arms – and Arthur laughed. We stared in wonder at the sight. The mite endured their claws and laughed for all his tiny soul was worth.

It is said that from the mould of the child, the man is cast.

Well, my master and I sat astride our horses, looking on, and this is what we saw: wild young Arthur, alight with life and laughter, indifferent to pain, already master of an impressive strength – and a more impressive will.

Merlin smiled and raised his hand in declamation, saying, ‘Behold, the Bear of Britain!’

Then he shook his head and sighed. ‘A wayward cub, look at him. Still, he must be taught, like any young beast. Our work is before us, Pelleas.’

Oh, what a work it was!

TWO

The interior of the church blazed with the light of hundreds of candles. Kings and lords knelt on the bare stone floors before the huge altar, heads bowed, while Bishop Urbanus read out the sacred text in a loud, droning voice. Kneeling, those haughty lords appeared the image of humility and reverence. Indeed, that they knelt at all was no small thing.

We entered in silence, Arthur holding the sword in his hand as if it were a live thing that might squirm and bite him; as if it were an offering, and he the penitent, dutifully bringing it to the altar.

Eyes gleaming in the shimmering light, he licked dry lips and advanced to the centre, turned and, with a last look over his shoulder at Merlin, started down the long, pillared aisle to the altar.

As Arthur approached, Urbanus glanced up, saw the young man advancing steadily towards him, and frowned with annoyance. Then he recognized the sword, and froze.

Bowed heads lifted as the bishop stopped reading. The lords beheld the priest's face, then turned as one to see what halted him.

Arthur was simply there in their midst, the sword in his hand.

Their faces! I could almost read their thoughts as their eyes started from their heads: What? The sword! Who is this upstart? Where has he come from? Look at him! A north country savage! Who is he?

See it now: astonishment gives way to anger. Their eyes quicken to rage.

They are on their feet, the mass forgotten. No one speaks. There is only the dry rustle of leather shoes on stone.

It is the silence before the lowering storm.

All at once, the violence breaks: thunder after the lightning's sharp flash.

Voices: questioning, demanding, angry. Hands: grasping, making fists, reaching for knives. Bodies: thrusting forward, crowding in, threatening.

Wonder of wonders, Arthur does not flinch! He grimly holds his ground as the lords of Britain close in around him. I can see his head and shoulders above the rest. He is more perplexed than concerned or frightened.

They are shouting: 'Usurper!' They are demanding his name and lineage. Trickery! they cry. Perfidy! Deceit! They scream like scalded pigs. The holy sanctuary has become a vortex of spite and fear. Arthur stands silent in its centre, unmoved and unmoving. He is an effigy carved in stone, and the noblemen are writhing dancers.

The hate! The hate is like the heat from an oven. It is the thrust of a spear, the blow of a closed fist. It is the venom of a spitting viper.

I struggle towards Arthur. I do not know how to help him, but I must stand with him. The throng around him is a solid wall. I cannot reach him.

Arthur stands alone in the fury his appearance has created.

Swords are thrust in the air; knives glint. I am certain they will kill the boy. They will see his head on a spike before they bow the knee to him. It was a dreadful mistake to bring him here.

Urbanus, arms above his head, hands waving, shoves close. His face white as death, he is calling for peace, for order. No one hears him. They do not want to hear him. A hand snakes out, and blood spurts from the bishop's nose. Urbanus falls back with a muffled cry.

The crowd closes. 'Kill him! Kill the usurper!' It is a death chant.

Arthur's eyes go grey and hard. His brow lowers. His grip tightens on the hilt of the sword in his hand. It is no longer an offering; it is a weapon once more, and he will use it.

Kill him!... Kill him!... Kill him!

The din is horrific. The mob presses closer.

My sword is ready. Where is Merlin?

Father God! It is all a dreadful mistake. We are dead men.

And then, just as I begin to raise my sword to cleave a path to Arthur's side, there comes a sound like a tempest wind – the blast of a mighty sea gale. Men fall back, suddenly afraid. They cover their heads with their arms and peer into the darkness above. What is it? Is the roof falling? The sky?