

***The Black Rood***  
***Book II of The Celtic Crusades***  
By Stephen R. Lawhead

**Chapter One**

*November 10, 1901: Paphos, Cyprus*

The summons came while I was sitting at my desk. The afternoon post had just been delivered—the office boy placing the tidy bundle into my tray—so I thought nothing of it as I slid the paper knife along the pasted seam. It was only upon shaking out the small cream-colored card that my full attention was engaged. I flipped the card over on the blotter. The single word, "Tonight" written in a fine script, brought me upright in my chair.

I felt my stomach tighten as an uncontrollable thrill tingled through me. This was followed by an exasperated sigh as I slumped back in my chair, the card thrust at arm's length as if to hold off the inevitable demand of that single, portentous word.

Truth to tell, a fair length of time had passed since the last meeting of the Inner Circle, and I suppose a sort of complacency had set in which resented this sudden and unexpected intrusion into my well-ordered existence. I stared at the offending word, fighting down the urge to pretend I had not seen it. Indeed, I quickly shoved it out of sight into the middle of my sheaf of letters and attempted to forget about it.

Curiosity, and a highly honed sense of duty, won the struggle. Resigning myself to my fate, I rang for one of the lads and sent him off with a hastily scribbled note of apology to my wife explaining that an engagement of the utmost importance had just arisen and she must soldier on without me for the evening, and please not to wait up as I anticipated being very late. A swift glance in my desk diary revealed that, as luck would have it, the familial household was to be appropriated for a meeting of certain august members of the Ladies' Literacy Institute and Temperance Union, a gaggle of well-meaning old dears whose overabundant maternal energies have been directed to the improvement of society through reading and abstinence from strong drink—except sherry. Worthy goals, to be sure, but unspeakably dull. Instantly, my resentful resignation turned to unbounded elation; I was delighted to have a genuine excuse to forgo the dull agonies of an evening which, if past experience was any indicator, could only be described as boredom raised to the level of high art.

Having shed this onerous domestic chore, new vistas of possibility opened before me. I considered dining at the club, but decided on taking an early supper so as to leave plenty of time for the cab journey to the chapel where the members of our clandestine group met on these rare occasions. With a contrite heart made buoyant by a childlike excitement, I

contemplated the range of alternatives before me. There were several new restaurants in Hanover Street that I had been meaning to try, with a public house nearby recommended by a junior colleague in the firm; off the leash for the night, I determined my course.

When work finished for the day, I lingered for a time in my office, attending to a few small tasks until I was certain the office boys and junior staff had gone, and I would not be followed, however accidentally. I feel it does no harm to take special precautions on these infrequent occasions; no doubt it is more for my own amusement than anything else, but it makes me feel better all the same. I should not like even the slightest carelessness on my part to compromise the Inner Circle.

After a pint of porter at the Wallace Arms, I proceeded around the corner to Alexander's Chop House, where I dined on a passable roast rabbit in mustard sauce and a glass of first-rate claret before the cab arrived. As the evening was fine and unseasonably balmy, I asked the driver to pull the top of the carriage back and enjoyed a splendid drive through the city and out into the nearby countryside. I arranged with the driver to meet me for the return journey and, when he was well out of sight, walked the last mile or so to the chapel to meet the others.

Upon nearing the place, I saw someone hurrying up the lane ahead of me; I recognized the fellow as De Cardou, but I did not hail him. We never draw attention to one another in public. Even the Brotherhood's lower orders are advised to refrain from acknowledging a fellow member in passing on the street. For them it is a discipline which, faithfully applied, may lead to greater advancement in time; for the Inner Circle, it is an unarguable necessity—now more than ever, if such a thing can be possible.

Admittedly, these arcane concerns seem very far away from the honest simplicity of life on the Greek island where I now find myself. Here in the sun-soaked hills above Paphos, it is easy to forget the storm clouds gathering in the West. But the writing is on the wall for anyone with eyes to see. Even I, the newest recruit to our hallowed and holy order, recognize dangers which did not exist a year or two ago; and in these last days such dangers will only increase. If ever I doubted the importance of the Brotherhood, I doubt it no longer.

Our meeting that night was solemn and sobering. We met in the Star Chamber, hidden beneath the chancel, as it affords a more comfortable setting for discussion. I took my seat at the round table and, after the commencement ritual and prayer, Genotti asked to begin the proceedings with a report on the Brotherhood's interests in South America and the need for urgent intervention in the worsening political climate. "While the peace treaty concluded in the first months of last year between Chile and Brazil remains in force," he said, "efforts to undermine the treaty continue. It has come to my attention that agents in the employ of Caldero, a dangerous anarchistic political faction, are planning an attack on the palace of the Chilean president. This attack will be blamed on Brazil in an effort to draw the two governments back into open conflict."

Evans, our Number Two, expressed the concern of the group and asked Genotti's recommendation. "It is my belief that the presidential staff must be warned, of course, so that protective measures may be taken. I also advocate, with the Brotherhood's approval, monies to be advanced to fund the training of an agent to be placed within Caldero and bring about its self-destruction."

Ordinarily, such a proposal would have engendered a lengthy discussion on the manner and methods of implementing a plan. This time, however, Pemberton rose to his feet and, before debate could begin, thanked Genotti for his industry on the Brotherhood's behalf.

"However," he said, his voice taking on a sepulchral tone, "it is becoming increasingly clear that our ventures into the manipulation of political systems cannot continue. It is dangerous, and potentially destructive to the overall aims of the Inner Circle—not least because such meddling in the power structures of sovereign nations possesses a vast and unperceived potential to seduce us away from our prime objectives."