TLC Showcase

Jeremy Stafford-Deitsch

Introduction to *Citadel of Time*

My last book was a photography/ancient history guide to Turkey (*Kingdoms of Ruin*, IB Tauris 2010), and while exploring Troy I fell in love afresh with the Homeric epics. Meanwhile, I have been interested in the Bronze Age remains of Bodmin Moor, Cornwall—where I live—for longer than I have lived here. This story *Citadel of Time* combines both themes. It tells of a disparate collection of characters who are born/reborn in three different epochs on the moor and are forced, in the central, Bronze Age episode, to resolve their own epic crises. Bodmin Moor is rich in Arthurian legends and these are also woven into the tale so that the reader comes to see that they are distorted recollections of prehistoric events. The wilderness setting of *Citadel of Time* serves as the spacious canvas for themes beyond it and themes beyond. The central topics of war, hatred, fanaticism and the redeeming influence of love, have perennial relevance. Anomalous phenomena such as precognitive dreams and reincarnation add a supernatural dimension to the story.

TLC has provided me with constructive and invaluable guidance—not to mention well-needed encouragement from Rebecca Swift!—that has allowed me to bring the story to where it now is. Jane Adams was the reader and if I might distil her wisdom into three words they would be: take your time. So I did. And a little more. And in so doing I have learnt that it is one thing to have an idea for a tale; another to bring it to coherent fruition. Indeed, I now realise that the writing of the factual books of my past was a doddle compared to the challenge—based on endless glittering choices at the end of one sentence and the start of the next—of creating a novel.

Citadel of Time, by Jeremy Stafford-Deitsch

Extract

It is early in the story and the year is 1830. Parson Tink has agreed to take the family of the village cobbler to Stowe's Hill on the moor. Tristan, the cobbler's son, has had terrible nightmares about the hill and avoids it; the parson, for reasons he will not disclose, likewise stays off the moor.

The next morning there was a clatter outside the Marrack home followed by a single bang on the front door that threatened to crack it. According to Obadiah's pocket watch it was nearly ten o'clock even if the church bells had recently sounded fifteen. Obadiah opened the door to see the Reverend Eustatius Tink wearing his thickest outdoor coat.

'Good morning Obadiah Marrack. It is I. Lucifer can hurl meteors, Beelzebub can fling comets, Mephistopheles can bombard our party with asteroids. I shall lead the expedition to Stowe's Hill regardless. Do you think it is going to rain?'

'Good morning, parson. I have come to doubt whether this is a sound idea,' Obadiah attempted. 'Tristan was thoroughly disturbed last night. He fears the moor dreadfully.'

'But once a fancy takes hold in my mind doubt is routed,' Tink replied. 'You cannot hit a six with the first ball of the match if you doubt.'

'Tris must be in the workshop catching up on his tasks. It would be best if he is not disturbed. After all, sir, you require your boots in the foreseeable future.'

The priest's face lit up.

'No, sir, I require my boots by Wednesday.' Tink leant towards Obadiah and did his version of a whisper, which, at close range, was at least as audible as his speaking voice and certainly carried further. 'The big toe on my right foot has turned green. And then there is the aroma.'

Behind the priest was the cart of Samuel Hony, gravedigger, with Dozy, his pale and shaggy cart horse, tethered to it. Hony sat hunched behind the animal fiddling with a stick, his bulbous-nosed, red face locked in a resigned expression. Every few seconds he prodded Dozy to keep her awake.

Tink gestured towards the gravedigger.

‘I have summoned Sam to attend on our expedition as his contribution to the repair of the church roof.’

‘That’s as may be but—’ Hony attempted.

‘That’s as may be but nothing!’ Tink snapped, before turning back to Obadiah. ‘Sam here is delighted to transport our party on his way to the hamlet of Henwood where he shall visit his cousins.’

‘I have no cousins in Henwood. I told you that a hundred times, parsnip,’ the gravedigger grumbled.

‘By the gargoyles of Hell they are impertinent ruffians up Henwood way. Who else’s cousins might they be?’ Tink responded thunderously before turning to Obadiah. ‘Sam shall gladly transport our party on his way to Henwood, we shall disembark and explore and we shall be collected by our punctilious gravedigger on his punctual return. He shall know we are ready for collection as I shall stand on top of the hill and shout.’

The parson nodded and folded his arms.

‘That’s as may be but I’m away to Liskeard—the other direction,’ Hony replied.

‘Henwood or repair the confounded church roof yourself!’

Turning to Obadiah, the exasperated vicar saw Mary appear behind her husband, a concerned expression on her face. She said something into Obadiah’s ear and he spun around to face her. They whispered urgently to each other.

‘What is it?’ the priest demanded.

‘It’s Tristan, sir,’ Obadiah answered. ‘He has vanished.’

‘Vanished?! By the sulphur of Hades how did he manage that?’ Tink asked. ‘Was there a flash? Was there a bang?’

‘I mean he has run away,’ Obadiah explained.

‘Oh,’ Tink replied in a lesser tone. ‘How very dull. But why?’

‘To avoid exploring the moor, sir. I told you how he dreads it,’ Obadiah said.

There was a glimmer of hope in Sam Hony’s eyes.

‘That’s as may be but I say he’s in a drinking den in Liskeard. I’ll fetch the boy back directly. See you in a few days.’ He started prodding and shouting at his cart horse. ‘Dog and Duck, girl! Dog and Duck!’

The horse looked around sorrowfully at her master.

‘HALT!’ the Reverend Eustatius Tink bellowed at the immobile animal.

Dozy bolted and the cart bounced wildly behind her. Sam Hony was rolled onto his back. He shouted and cursed as his legs kicked the air. Villagers raised their eyes in surprise: such behaviour was more typical of the return journey.

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Tristan did not consider himself brave. But then he did not consider himself a coward either. He knew he should have told his parents of his plan but they were asleep when he set off, long before dawn.

A brash orange sun had risen and the cold wind from the west chilled Tristan but he carried on along the skinny, ancient lane that led, for all its fussy winding, north. Sometimes the wet and rutted route ran between ancient granite walls that incorporated the bulbous contours of vast boulders, at other times it sank into gullies bordered by wildly overgrown hedgerows. Both provided some shelter from the wind. Fringing the lane were dew-soaked gorse bushes. Beyond, at the edge of the moor, was a glistening expanse of dying bracken whose dark orange colour was enriched by the early morning light.

Ahead, Tristan saw a flock of tatty moorland sheep approaching on the lane. They were being controlled by a black-and-white sheepdog. A farmer walked behind whistling and calling out instructions to the dog that darted this way and that to keep the flock together. The lane was soon clogged with the sheep and Tristan had to press against a low wall to let them pass. The farmer, looking at Tristan with curiosity, nodded.

'All right, now, boy,' he said. 'Where's off to?'

Tristan wished him good morning and asked if the lane led to Henwood.

'Henwood? What business would you be having there?' the farmer inquired, coming to a halt.

'None, sir. I am away for Stowe's Hill,' Tristan responded. 'Is it not off the Henwood lane?'

'Ah. So you be one of *they*.'

'One of who?' Tristan asked.

'The folk drawn to Stowe's Hill. I call they 'the crazies'.'

'I do not understand,' Tristan responded.

'They come from all over Cornwall, and some from farther afield still, and it be left to Jowan Kitto here to gather they up in all their broken pieces and send they home. Some I never find. Fellow who thought himself King Arthur came from

Somerset six month back wearing a copper crown. Had pebbles in it for gems. Never seen such a lunatic thing my whole life! Vanished out there, he did. I spent a week searching: wet ass no fish. So where are you coming from?'

'St Cleer.'

The farmer blinked in surprise.

'Hmmm. Mind you I still say you be one of they: it's the ungodly shine of your eyes. A local crazy.'

Tristan began to wonder if the farmer was right.

'But if you *must* go on the moor let Jowan Kitto presume to give you some advice: come back next summer. That's as best as I can put it. I didn't trust the dawn: the sky was darker than a dog's guts.' Tristan said nothing so the farmer fleshed out his warning. 'Me, I keep to the lanes from now 'til spring. The sheep are on their own out there. Come the blizzards, fools go plunging into the snow drifts to pull their sheep out. But then I has to dig the dead farmers out.' Kitto was shaking his head.

'I am going *now*, sir,' Tristan insisted, 'and the weather's fair enough for autumn.'

'Call this autumn, boy? This ain't autumn—it's winter ready to pounce.'

'Why would you scare I away?'

'Because only a fool would not be scared. Go on then: take your chances.'

'What chances?'

'Stowe's Hill is high up, you see. It catches every storm blown in from the ocean. Every step you've took so far has been uphill and that cursed hill is higher still.'

'Cursed? Why cursed?'

The farmer went over to a stunted tree and broke off several thin branches. He made a square out of four of them and then joined the corners with an inner cross.

'Stand on this,' he instructed.

'Why?' Tristan enquired.

The farmer took Tristan by the shoulder and positioned him on the branches.

'Dandy: here!' he called to his dog. The dog bounded over. 'Put out your hand, boy!'

Tristan obeyed and the dog sniffed it.

'That'll do, that'll do,' the farmer announced, pulling the dog back by the scruff of the neck. He looked squarely at Tristan. 'Enjoy your adventure. But never take your eyes off the sky: it was a treacherous sunrise, you see. Weather's from the west and that's where trouble comes from. Head back sooner rather than later. If you have to ask yourself if it's getting dark you're too late.' Then he added as an afterthought: 'Do others know you're going on the moor?'

'It is the last place they would look.'

The farmer rolled his eyes.

'Well then trust your compass.'

'I have no compass,' Tristan admitted.

'Told not a soul! Has no compass! Oh what's the use? I might as well be learning a rabbit to fly. Remember this: the hawthorn trees bend east because of the wind. That's back this way. Head east and sooner or later you should find this lane again. That's if you can find enough hawthorn trees—truth be told it's as bald as an egg out there. Good luck to you.'

The farmer nodded before marching off with his dog and flock.

Tristan continued along the lane. When it rose onto higher ground he climbed a boulder at its side and looking ahead, saw the ominous boss of Stowe's Hill. Its flanks were stained sombre orange by bracken that appeared to be aflame. Crowned with a silhouette of blunt-edged rocks, the hill dominated the horizon like a presence: the undulating landscape that surrounded it seemed unimportant.

A shudder surged through Tristan: even from afar the hill looked ominously significant. He was half excited and half alarmed. The vague fears that had kept him off the moor for his whole life had changed to wary fascination now that he was at its very edge. It was so starkly beautiful.

It was time to strike out across the moor. He would approach the hill boldly, directly—and climb it. Once he reached its summit of granite boulders stacked and strewn, his fears would be conquered.

Soon he left the fringing hawthorn trees behind and was out on the barren moor itself: an immense meeting of land and sky. The undulating emptiness knew nothing of families or friends, villages or villagers. All was grandeur—an unpeopled spaciousness hinting at other possibilities.

Tristan forgot about the wind. He looked to the horizon and saw ever more

distant hills whose craggy silhouettes faded into the distance. His emotions swirled with contradictions. Each step he took through the coarse moorland grass made him feel more like an intruder. Yet he felt as if he was being drawn ever deeper into the isolation by the moor itself. It was simultaneously forbidding and welcoming yet in the combination he felt secure. Every blade of grass seemed to matter, every spiky gorse bush was worthy of wonder and every patch of dying bracken glowed with significance. Everything combined in a message a fraction beyond his grasp.

Tristan stopped walking and steadied himself. He should have been prepared for this nonsense and was annoyed at being caught out by the moor's tricks. He remembered a warning Old Boy Hawken had once given him—he called it the moor's embrace: 'Can drive the wrong sort mad,' Hawken had said when, a year before, Tristan had asked him about life on the moor. 'Don't go onto the moor if you can't look she in the eye and say 'Enough of your mischief!' or the canny old maid shall have you.' Then the rogue had rolled his eyes. 'She enters your bones as rot enters beams. Shatters the proudest first'.

As the westerly wind buffeted Tristan, his mind drifted to what was perhaps Hawken's saddest song. He had composed it for a visit to St Cleer years before and in it he announced he was in search of a wife. The villagers—thinking he was joking—laughed; Tristan had known the joking was serious. If the song was gone, the meaning and pain it evoked were suddenly intensely present. Tristan vividly remembered Hawken's expression as he left the village that day, his peat unsold, the twinkle in his eye extinguished, his wiry body swaying resignedly to the lurches of his cart. Hawken knew no woman would marry a moorland peat-cutter; none would wish to live in the remoteness, a solitude lashed by hail and gale. Yet Old Boy Hawken—who looked far older than his years—could joke about it all.

Tristan could not fathom why the intense recluse had so vividly invaded his imagination. He looked out across the granite-littered expanse into which Old Boy Hawken would vanish; the landscape from which weeks later Crazy Hawken would emerge with peat piled high on his cart and a clumsy ditty on his lips. Tristan shuddered, unable to decide where the jollity ended and the madness began.

Snapping out of his reverie, Tristan wondered when St Cleer would next see Crazy Hawken—whether the stubborn old peat cutter would somehow survive winter yet again and arrive half-starved, with the daffodils and house martins. In answer, he heard a noise: the creak of a cart. Tristan spun around but there was

nothing, no one. Yet as he walked he felt Hawken alongside, riding his cart, the oxen plodding, the peat sold. An invisible Hawken was escorting him onto the moor. And there was a song on invisible lips filled with trallallas and ditty-Os whose feeling and meaning were one: Hawken had died the night before.

Tristan froze, startled. He was only a hundred paces onto the moor and impossible things were already happening. Ahead, on the horizon, was the gigantic, granite-studded reason he was here: Stowe's Hill. For a moment it seemed to be conscious and watching him, even to be reading his thoughts. But as soon as Tristan had these bizarre sensations, the hill seemed to slam shut like the lid of a box.

Though he tried to convince himself it was just another hill, Tristan's determination to climb and conquer Stowe's Hill was wavering. He was barely onto the moor yet he had immediately encountered the ghost of Hawken. What other dramas lay ahead? Perhaps he should retreat—scramble back over the wall that followed the lane and return to the safety of St Cleer. Who would ever know? But *he* would know.

Tristan marched on, struggling to subdue his fears. He remembered Tink's description of the storm that had struck St Cleer and snatched away the maid's corpse even as the priest and Hawken clung desperately to the granite cross. He remembered his Excalibur vision and the frightful nightmare of the moorland beggar of only last night. He remembered the fear in Tink's voice when he warned him to steer clear of the supernatural—a fear foretold in a still vivid vision of a dozen years before. And here he was, stupidly brave, marching across the moor challenging the unknown to a confrontation.

About the writer

For many years **Jeremy Stafford-Deitsch** worked with a camera in one hand and a pen in the other, producing illustrated books on subjects close to his heart such as sharks, coral reefs, mangrove ecosystems and ancient history. However, he always longed to attempt novel writing and a few years ago he moved to the edge of Bodmin Moor in Cornwall for a fresh start in an inspirational setting.