

GLASTONBURY By Trevor Denyer

Sitting in the pub garden supping a pint, he studies the leaflets. He tries to take in the details. The ungraspable myths.

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It is hot and humid on the Tor. As he climbs the steeper southern side, a couple of elderly ladies pass him on the narrow path.

"I've achieved a lifelong ambition," one of them says. "To climb to the top of Glastonbury Tor."

He watches as they descend, brittle boned yet fulfilled at last. The hill swamps them with its power.

At the summit a few people rest on the grassy slopes. They lie, cross like - arms outstretched - soaking up atmosphere. The pinnacle of St. Michael reaches towards the blue sky. All around the Isle, the flatlands slumber in heat haze, stretching away to ill-defined horizons. There is an eerie silence here. It's the silence of age - expectant and waiting for change.

He enters the tower and gazes upward, past ancient stones to the square blaze of light at the top. It's cool inside as he sits on one of the tomb shaped seats. Sweat turns cold against his skin. It runs in small rivulets from his armpits. He stares at the flagstones of the floor and imagines a King returning.

There's a soft voice in his mind, whispering promise. He is contented here, and mindful of pre-history. It's as if he's found the centre of a desolate engine. Across the land the standing stones vibrate, ignored by the tide of humanity. They have no concept of ancient devices.

Outside once more, he searches for the line of St. Michael: to the Northeast through Avebury, and Southwest to the Mount. The places are too distant to see beneath the haze, yet he senses the presence of the dragon and the serpent. They doze through the hot afternoon. Their breath is magic on the air.

Again the whispered secrets come. "Thread the maze," they say. "Find the Land of the Dead."

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In the Abbey grounds the monks live on. The sound of prayer and sanctity echoes down the ages. The weight of history is heavy here. He thinks he sees them, but when he turns, they

merge into the ruins. Only their memories remain.

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In the over populated graveyard, the monks dug down - deep into the earth, between stone crosses. Through the layers of reconstruction they toiled and found a cross of lead, inscribed with ancient words:

'HIC IACET SEPULTUS INCLITUS REX ARTURIUS IN INSULA AVALONIA'
('HERE LIES BURIED THE RENOWNED KING ARTHUR IN THE ISLE OF AVALON')

They dug deeper, inspired by what they'd found - breathless and excited by what they dared to hope for.

Deep within the pre-Dunstan earth they found his bones, buried with Guinevere in a hollow log. They felt the spirits rise from the grave and fill them with hope.

Lifting the bones from the sacred ground, they enshrined the lovers in a tomb worthy of a King and Queen. Important people travelled far to worship in the Lady Chapel, paying homage to the casket.

But the miracle had passed, and only bones remained.

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Evening has come. It's time to thread the maze. He stands by the lower marker stone. The Tor rises before him, the lines of its terraces etched by shadows as the sun sinks behind it.

He's read the leaflets that offer arguments as to the validity of various myths and legends. He smiles at the thought of all those informed, logical ideas and conclusions. He stands there, feeling the presence of the dead. They will guide him along the sacred path.

He begins the climb, finding the second marker stone. He touches it - feels the vibrations, tingling through his fingers. The dead urge him on, impatient now that they have brought him this far.

He moves away, beginning the circuit along the left-hand path. There are isolated houses and clumps of bushes below; landmarks confirming the route. The path follows the ridges of the Tor. They are not always clear, but certainty drives him on. The ghosts remember, for they have gone before him, following the coils of the sleeping serpent.

Eventually he arrives at a point just above the second marker stone. He senses the pleasure of his invisible companions. He has completed the first circuit.

They guide him back to the stone. This time, he moves off in the other direction, following

the path immediately below the one he has just trodden.

The sun is sinking now, blazing low across the flatlands and sharpening the colours of the hill. It rises above him, dry earth showing through the carpet of grass. The ground is a scaly cover, protecting the coiled life within.

The effort makes him sweat. He's grateful for the shade of a small wood. Between the trees, the contours become confused. He's certain that he sees the cowed figures of monks, guiding him along the true path.

He moves upward, completing circuits that lead him ever closer to the tower then swing downward, teasing him. Through lengthening shadows and deepening shade the winding pathway goes, until at last he stands facing east. The sun has gone to fill another world's day, leaving dusk to draw darkness over Glastonbury.

The town is hidden by the hill. He looks out across an empty patchwork of fields, scored by tracks, and dotted with occasional buildings and clumps of trees.

A sudden breeze whips across the incline of the hill, ruffling his hair. Silence surrounds him. He feels lonely and apprehensive. He stands at the edge of an abyss, and knows that there is no turning back. They wouldn't allow it.

He takes a deep breath. The air has turned damp and chilly. He shudders and walks towards a third stone that sits like a hunchback before a narrow entrance. The Tor has opened to him. After centuries of sentience, the gateway to the Land of the Dead draws him in.

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As he enters, the ghosts whisper sacred truths. The border between reality and imagination fades. Above and below him, the Glass Mountain spirals into the void. He floats midway between Heaven and Earth, his heart hammering against his chest.

Reflections are multiplied to infinity. Vertigo makes him nauseous. He closes his eyes and is alone with the voices. They tell him about the dragon, and the serpent that surrounds it. He opens his eyes. Fire and venom spread against the curves of the spiral, trying to break through. He opens his mouth to scream, but the voices fill his mind.

This is where the natural energies of the Earth meet with the supernatural power of Death. Gradually shadows become corporeal, detaching themselves from the edges of sight. The spiral castle shifts through the veil of his perception.

He is in a vast cave. A waterfall crashes into a wide subterranean river that flows into darkness. A mist of spray fills the place, and the roar of the falls batters his eardrums. He

covers his ears and closes his eyes.

The roar is like the rush of blood through hardened arteries.

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He is in a quiet place. The walls and ceiling are smooth, as if the rock has been polished.

Four hooded figures stand before him. Emblazoned across their cloaks is the spiral of the Cretan maze. They reach towards him.

"Come here," one of them says, his voice as dry as a desert. "We are the guardians of the Grail. Ours is the religion of the Cosmic Mother. The Great Goddess has ruled this place since ancient times. She who now is embodied within the Grail has held the natural order in balance. But now the ebb and flow of life is disturbed. Beyond this place, the energy of the standing stones is building. The paths of the Dragon become corrupted as the ways of the Old Religion are ignored, and man grows more certain that he can rule the world."

They move towards him. He shrinks away, raising his hands to his face.

"No!" he cries. "I cannot help you. Let me go!"

"But you can." The dusty voice is reverent. "You *must* remember when you came here before."

He closes his eyes and slips into a dream of memory.

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As they approached the Vale of Avalon, an expectant hush fell. They peered into the mist, straining for first sight of the Tor rising from the featureless, waterlogged wasteland that surrounded the channel along which their vessel moved. The journey from Palestine had been long and dangerous.

Philip's voice startled him. "You've come far, Joseph. Do you *want* to die among the barbarians?"

He turned, tired yet filled with expectation. "You know I had to return here. The risen Lord has charged me with the task of delivering the Shape Changer to this place."

"I understand that, but why here?"

Joseph smiled, despite his tiredness. "We've been friends for many years, and I'm grateful for your patience and acceptance. You've accompanied me here, respecting my wishes, and not questioning my motives. If I'd tried to explain before we reached this place, you wouldn't have understood."

Philip cleared his throat impatiently. "Don't presume too much upon our friendship," he said. "I'm not an idiot. I haven't questioned your motives because I knew that you wouldn't have

confided in me - until now. I came with you because I'm a trader, and there's much here that I hope to buy."

"You're also a disciple of Christ," said Joseph, scornfully. "I'm sure *your* motives are nobler than the mere acquisition of physical wealth."

Philip looked away, staring into the mist. "Of course they are," he said, "but I think the time has come for you to tell me why we came all this way."

Joseph sighed, feeling the weight of years upon him. "A long time ago, I came here with Jesus. We were young, yet even then he was a man of vision."

"You knew him before his ministry began?"

"Yes. We built a church here, below the Holy hill. He was drawn to the place. He told me that it was the centre of a vast power that spread beyond the confines of Earth, and that what we began here would last forever."

His eyes glistened as he remembered. Now he was an old man, his skin dark and wrinkled. A tear slid across the hollow of his cheek.

"We built Jerusalem here," he said.

"Look," whispered Philip, subdued by the sight. The Tor appeared before them as the veil of mist parted. It seemed to float above the land, reflected in the marshy waters. Dusk chilled the air, and the pilgrims pulled their ragged cloaks tighter to them.

Soon the shapes of dwellings appeared, hunched under the fading light. The lake village was raised on wooden piles above the marsh. A wharf extended along the base of a gently rising hill, dwarfed by the terraced magnificence of the Tor beyond.

"At last, we've come to Avalon," said Joseph, falling to his knees.

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Joseph carefully removed the Shape Changer from the wooden box. He placed it on the table. It appeared as a small wooden cup, but the edges were blurred. Colours shifted through a rainbow spectrum around it. He shut his eyes tightly. When he looked again, the object had resolved itself into a cruet.

"The blood and tears of Christ," muttered Joseph, "shed for our sins." He carefully opened the cruet and marvelled once more at the tiny pools in each compartment. They glistened, as fresh as the day they had been shed. He replaced the Shape Changer in its box, and carried it to the deck.

A crowd had gathered to greet the travellers. Joseph smiled as he placed the box in front of

him.

"I am Joseph, from Arimathea," he said. People muttered in surprise, and then became silent. They knew of him, and he was grateful for that. It had been a long time since he had spoken their language, but his memory was good. The Lord was with him, and he felt comforted.

"We are disciples of the risen Lord," he said, "and we come to continue the work that He began here."

Two men stepped forward from the crowd. They were dressed in grey cowls and carried wooden staffs.

"How do we know you are who you say you are?" said one of them in a soft, unassuming voice. "Traders come here from far and wide, not only to buy, but sometimes to rob."

Philip stepped forward. "How dare you suggest that we're no better than robbers!" he said angrily.

Joseph placed his hand on Philip's arm. "No, Philip. They are right to be cautious." He turned to the two men. "I'll prove that I am who I say; then you'll escort me to the chapel and its confines, so that I may spend my final days where once I walked with the Son of God."

"If you *are* Joseph," said the monk, "then you and your companions are welcome here, and we are honoured by your presence."

Joseph opened the wooden box. He peered into its dark interior. Something writhed there. He glimpsed the smooth scales of a snake. He reached inside and grasped the Shape Changer. As he drew it from the box it became a staff, as solid as those carried by the monks.

He stepped ashore and began to climb Wearyall Hill. Fatigue hovered at the edge of consciousness, threatening to engulf him. He tightened his grip on the staff and pressed onward, ignoring the aches of his body. The people followed.

The Shape Changer's power emanated from the staff. As he drew closer to the hilltop it seemed to tug impatiently, desperate for release.

At the summit of the hill, with the last vestiges of his strength, Joseph drove the staff into the ground. A hollow roar filled the air. The ground bucked beneath the crowd like a living thing. An array of colours surrounded them and curled away from the hill, to sink into the mists of evening. The staff blossomed into a stem of thorns. Small white flowers burst open, surrounded by green leaves.

The people cowered before the sight.

"Don't be afraid," said Joseph. "This tree will grow in Avalon as a sign of miracles. From it,

an ancient power has returned to bless the sacred earth. Hidden deep within the Tor beyond is the most Holy Grail of God. The blood and tears of Christ are now infused within this magic place."

The monks took him then, to rest and die within the circle of the church where Holy feet had once walked.

*

The memory is real. Joseph of Arimathea is reincarnated in him.

"Thirty monks entered here," one of the guardians says. "Only three returned from the Land of the Dead. Two were insane, and the third was struck dumb."

"They came from the Abbey."

"Yes. They were searching for the Celtic King who now awaits you."

"I will follow," he says.

*

They lead him along winding passages - a maze that duplicates the one above. At last they enter a place where nothing is solid. The floor writhes beneath his feet. He hears the heartbeat of the dragon.

"Without chaos, there is no order." He turns towards the voice. A tall man stands before him. The man is bearded and watches him through deep blue eyes. He is strong and well muscled; yet there is a gentleness about him. He has the aspect of a King.

Next to Arthur stands Guinevere. She is tall and comely. The fine blond strands of her hair radiate light. Chaos has given way to tranquillity.

Beyond the King and Queen, the Shape Changer waits. They move apart and he sees it, surrounded by the lost monks of Glastonbury Abbey.

As he watches, it changes from the plain wooden cup of the Last Supper, to a cruet containing holy blood and tears, to a glowing cauldron of plenty.

He cups his hands and reaches into the cauldron.

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The hill turns in upon itself. A rumble like thunder fills the darkness. Light illumines the tower, silhouetted against the glow.

He stands up and stares across the flatlands. The paths of the dragon are glowing, as if the molten centre of the Earth is rising through ancient faults. The Glastonbury monks are scattered across the hill like tombstones. Their whispers fill the air and the serpent begins to

uncoil, unravelling the maze.

His mouth is dry and his skin burns, dusty as parchment. He feels his hair moving and making his scalp itch. Sight is sharpened to a razor's edge. His mind fills with a vast knowledge as the prehistoric engine unwinds.

From deep within the Tor a power grows. He feels its approach as it rises from the Land of the Dead. It flows into him. The past and future collapse to a single point.

The prophecy is fulfilled. A King has returned.

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