

MARGARET'S MINE

The sudden cool of a dense cloud veiling the face of the afternoon sun brought Len abruptly to his senses. He opened his eyes, hesitantly at first, and looked about him trying to muster his remotely scattered thoughts. He was lying on a grassy bank halfway up a hillside. Away, in front and below him, stretched a gorse carpeted valley, tree-less except for a solitary copse, at the bottom of which he could detect, here and there, the sparkle of a stream as its incessant water tumbled in and out of pools as it ran its rocky journey to the sea.

He looked around again, slowly, studying each detail intently. With an air of disappointment he realised he was alone. In fact, other than himself, the only visible indication of humanity was the arc of several derelict buildings which, gaunt and proud, stride the course of the valley right to the point where its meander severed his line of vision. Behind and above him stood another. Looming and dominating his position was the massive, lichen covered, stone sepulchre of Wheal Margaret.

Gradually his consciousness reminded him of his situation. He had fallen asleep and had been dreaming, vividly, with total commitment. It was a dream that had completely engulfed him, entranced and enthralled him, and now, awaking was a cruel and bitter shock. But what was reality and which had been fantasy? As awareness seeped inwards like an insidious damp, he started to retrace the dream-like events of the last two days.

At the foot of the valley, where the arms opened to embrace the stone strewn shore, a small group of granite buildings clustered, shivering in the prevailing wind. Most, like the valley's occupants, were deserted, but at the junction of the narrow, winding, coastal road and the stream, near to the ancient Church, stood a small, living, Inn. The sun had dropped from sight behind the tall, watchful, hills to the West when Len, tired after his long journey, stopped the small sports car under the Inn sign. He had chosen this valley for his expedition because of the rumours, some might have called them legends, that there was here, still collectable for those who were prepared to make the arduous trek along the valley floor, prize mineral samples unlike most of those from the other locations in Cornwall which, over successive decades, had been picked clean. His current thesis was on Cornish mineralogy and it would be a triumph to be able to produce fresh and original high quality samples rather than refer to the familiar contents of the Museum or the University's Geological Department. He arrived late at the Inn, much later than planned, but the kind couple who owned and ran it accommodated him with the best of Cornish hospitality.

Thinking back now, viewing it from his lofty vantage, he could remember little of that first evening. He had declined dinner; he was much too tired. He had enjoyed a bath and had gone soon to bed. That was about all there was to it except, oh yes, the Inn sign. Yes, he had noticed the Inn sign! Collecting his luggage the diminutive boot of the car, he had looked up and his attention had been riveted by its simple, yet striking, design. It depicted a Cornish engine house and its associated angular chimney and, beyond the creaking post, standing on the hillside stood the same, in reality, gradually fading into the dusk.

He had dreamed that night. When he awoke, refreshed, in the morning to find the sun cutting a path into the bedroom, the aura was with him. He knew he had dreamed. The content was indistinct and elusive but a strange, nervous, excitement possessed him. During the night he had lived a strange adventure, some marvellous happening, but like the quest for a lost civilisation, in the morning he could uncover no more than the merest traces of what had gone before. The glory was past.

His first day was spent searching the ground for his minerals and his inner self for further clues. Both were barren. The valley was long. A number of shafts had been sunk and the engine houses stood like sentries positioned over the disgorged tips. Those at the lower end were clearly the oldest and it was evident that the tips had been reworked later when it was economic to abstract previously discarded ore. More than once his eyes strayed up, along the line of truncated chimneys, each of dissimilar height, as they reached and disappeared around the valley's natural curve. Would the pickings be better up there? He resisted the immediate temptation and resolved to work his way methodically up the valley, examining each location in turn. He could write a thesis on the way the valley's mining had developed.

Len found the solitude unnerving after living in London, and he mentioned this to the Innkeeper's wife that second evening. "That's right, my dear," she exclaimed, rubbing away at the seldom used glasses behind the bar. "We're a little off the beaten track here, even at the height of the summer, and it's a real pleasure to have a visitor like yourself. The cove's no good for most holidaymakers. All stones and tide locked. They all go to the sands of St Ives, or Marazion, or stay in Falmouth. Now, in the days of the wreckers and the mines, well, it was a different story then." Len smiled. She spoke with enthusiasm and conviction of one who had actually witnessed these events, but the mines had been worked out well before the turn of the century.

After a bath and a meal he sat with his hosts, sipping port, before a natural fire in the solitary, low-beamed, bar. There was little custom and the evening was spent virtually undisturbed. "Yes," he said in response to a question from the lady of the house, "I've come down to look for mineral samples from the tips in the valley. I must admit I haven't been too successful this end. I'll try further up tomorrow."

"Few are prepared to go up there now," said the landlord. "You'll find the path pretty much overgrown and virtually impassable right up the top."

"Why's that?" asked Len, admiring the deep hue of the glass in the firelight. His companions exchanged glances and Len sensed a change in the convivial atmosphere. There was a prolonged pause before the landlord continued.

"There's a local belief about the mine at the head of the valley. It's called Wheal Margaret, and there's some who say it's haunted. None'll go up there after dark, and there's many a man who'll not go up there in the daylight!"

"How fascinating," mused Len. "Haunted? By what or whom?"

"Oh, it's just a fanciful tale, isn't it, Toby?" cried the wife, a little eagerly, Len thought. "It's not worth the telling." Toby paused again, wrinkling his weather beaten face, deep in thought.

"I suppose there's no harm in telling you," he said. "She baint been seen there for many a year."

"She?"

"The lass, Margaret! The lass who gave her name to the mine!"

"I'll lock up, Toby, if 'e want," said the landlord's wife with obvious disquiet.

"Leave it, Martha. We're quite safe here, quite safe." He leaned forward and tapped Len's knee. "She's a bit nervy, Martha is. A bit on the nervy side. Don't you worry about her. She'll be fine in a moment. Where was I?"

"You had just mentioned that the mine was named after a girl called Margaret."

"That's right. Well, it happened many, many years ago. My grandfather it was who told me the tale, and it were old then."

"Toby, please!"

"Tish, woman!" grunted the landlord, waving to his wife to be silent. Martha said no more and whilst the tale was unfolded, she shrank nervously into the depths of a high-backed armchair, seeking sanctuary, her dark eyes occasionally darting furtively, probing the deep

recesses of the ill lit room, or glancing apprehensively at the window. "As I was a-saying, it all happened a long, long, time ago."

With the fluid and ease of a well practised and seasoned storyteller, Toby unfolded a tale which made Len feel sad now to think of it. At the time in question, all the mines in the valley were owned by one family called Tregeven who lived in the house which was now the Inn. There was one exception, the last mine, way up at the head of the valley, the mine which later became known as Wheal Margaret, which was owned then by a young man, of local and humble birth, called Richard Owen. Margaret, the sole child of the Tregevens, had fallen hopelessly in love with Richard but her father, who earnestly coveted the possession of the mine, had his heart set on a better match for his daughter, and vigorously opposed and forbade the proposals of marriage. He had locked up his daughter, strangely enough in the very room in which Len was now staying, and Richard had failed in his attempts to free her. Matters had come to an awful climax when Richard was killed under ghastly and odd circumstance, crushed by the collapse of a wall of one of the buildings near his mine. There was talk of gunpowder having been used, and Tregeven was implicated in all the whispers, but nothing could be proved and no-one was brought to justice. Margaret, however, had no doubt of her father's guilt. Released from her imprisonment, she stood over Richard's open grave in the small churchyard and loudly cursed her father and his miners. Then, heartbroken and distraught, she fled up the valley to Owen's mine and plunged to her death down the main shaft.

A paradox ensued. When it was read, it transpired that Richard had not only made a will, but that he had conveyed the mine to Margaret, and it now reverted to Tregeven. He had lost his daughter, but he had achieved his aim and proudly basted of it as his compensation. There were some claimed he had said he was the better for the deal, but his daughter's curse was effective. Wheal Margaret, as it rapidly became known as, proved unworkable. Not one of the local miners would work there, and disaster struck at a team of Welsh miners brought in by Tregeven. When the first shift went into the main adit it was claimed that the leading men were confronted by a young woman who forbade them to enter and remove the ore. They had turned back, but those coming behind disbelieved what the others told them, and proceeded. Three died shortly after when part of the roof collapsed. Thereafter, no-one would enter the workings except Tregeven. Then the lower shafts in the valley were plagued by one misfortune after another and, within five years of his daughter's death, Tregeven was broken, bankrupt and quite mad. All down the valley the stamping mills stood silent.

"Others have come, tried to get the mines working, failed and gone," added the landlord. "It's a sombre story and it has passed into local folklore, with sightings of Margaret from time to time. They always say her appearance means a disaster is about to befall someone. The sad thing is, as she'd a-taken her own life, they wouldn't lay the lass in the churchyard. Instead they buried her up the valley, near the mine. Some a-says that is why she walks the valley, seeking to be united with her lover. You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

Len shook his head. "No," continued Toby. "No fear of ghosts, but watch you for the shafts. Some of them aren't fenced and can be quite dangerous. My goodness! Is that the time? We had better lock up!"

"I'd just like to get a map from the car," said Len and went outside. The sky was velvet and clear. The valley was bathed in bright, cold, moonlight. As he turned from the car he glanced up at the Inn sign. Was it his imagination that made him see a figure there, white and feminine, standing beside the painted engine house? Or was it a trick of the deceptive moonlight?

He spent a restless night, half asleep, half awake, suspended in a series of menacing and frustrating nightmares, locked and trapped in the prison he now knew to have been Margaret's. Precious samples would materialise before his, there for the taking, but as he reached out, they would either be out of his reach, or a chasm, a river or a shaft, would appear, blocking his path. The prize was always elusive but he persevered and just when he thought he had it in his grasp a

woman confronted him and he seemed to descend into an endless fall. He fell into the dream of the previous night. He fell into Margaret's outstretched arms. Now all was rapture and bliss as he was immersed in an ecstasy of love and passion. She appeared as the paragon of all he sought from womanhood. This was wonderful. This was heaven!

Len awoke bathed in a cold sweat, the bed clothes awry and on the floor. He sat up and beyond the window could see the valley swathed in a misty, grey, pre-dawn, half-light. The arc of engine houses could barely be distinguished but his attention was concentrated on the point at which the line disappeared behind the bluff of a hill. What lay beyond? He knew that there, out of his sight, stood Wheal Margaret, but what else? He resolved that would be his objective today. There he would find all he sought.

Len set out eagerly and full of anticipation that morning, bearing his stout rucksack on his back. As he started up the path once worn smooth by the passage of countless pack animals, a chilly sun penetrated the mist-laden atmosphere. He climbed over the stone stile and wandered through the desolate churchyard, trying to distinguish the origin of the weathered headstones. Many were of unfortunate mariners and although he found one bearing the name "Tregeven", he failed to locate the last resting place of Richard Owen. If it existed, he told himself. It could be all a tale. They could be there, now, watching him from the Inn, laughing! What did it matter?

Following the stream, twisting and passing over it several times by way of damp, unsteady, stepping stones, he moved on, up the valley, through a straggling copse, a damp glade, and out into the dense gorse. In places it was so high that he lost sight of everything except the sky. At other locations it fell away when he came close to the sad, lonely, buildings which marked the locations of the shafts. Near to the bend he succumbed to temptation and deviated from his plan by investigating the tips of the fifth shaft. He had failed to reach this far in the complex on the previous day, but he met with no greater success. It was overgrown and exhausted. He tried the sixth with similar results and realised he had wasted the greater part of the morning. Reaching a point near the top of the mounds he turned to look up the valley. At that very moment the sun broke through the mist and a glittering cylinder of light fell, like a silver rainbow, to the ground, illuminating the most distant of the mine buildings. There it was!

A fresh surge of excitement catalysed him into action. He scrambled down the slope with ill-considered haste and recommenced his expedition up the path. The sun broke through again, driving steam from the increasingly thick vegetation that was gradually encroaching on the struggling path. Brambles reached out and tore at his clothes. Spikes of gorse jabbed his limbs, and he grew increasingly hot and tired.

Suddenly the path ended and Len found himself standing in a dark, narrow, overgrown fairy tale glade. Its edges were defined by trees that stood in the form of an oval, so symmetrical and geometrically correct as to make him conclude that they had been planted there. Through the centre ran the stream, emerging from, and disappearing into, living green caverns. The walls looked impenetrable and there was no sign of an exit other than the way he had entered. He would have to follow the stream and try to force his way along the bank.

As he made his way to the point of entry, he found the remains of a fence, then amongst the undergrowth, a heap of large stones. Closer examination led him to conclude that it was a high, dry stone wall, perhaps the remains of the gable wall of a cottage. Could it have been Richard Owen's house, if such a person existed? Near the base of the wall, one of the stones glistened and momentarily caught his attention, causing him to kneel down and examine it. When he looked up, he could see the sky which was now blue and the top of a chimney. The sudden movement made him feel dizzy and he no longer had any clear recollection of what followed.

The sun was hot and the glade was humid. The combination of these two factors had clearly affected him, but he could vaguely recall setting off along the bank, struggling to force his

way through the dense undergrowth. All the time it felt as if there was someone at his side, urging him on. Twice he stopped in near panic and desperation, but each time this influence calmed him and he went on, drawn by an invisible and elusive force.

Suddenly he staggered into the clear and, in the absence of the vegetative resistance, he stumbled and fell to the ground. Looking up he could see, clear and fresh, as if it had just been deposited there, a vast waste tip rising before him, up towards the chimney. A smile appeared on his face. "I've made it!" he exclaimed.

"Made what?" said a soft voice from behind him. "No-one comes here anymore. Why have you come?" Startled, Len spun around. Before his shadow stood a fair young woman, prettily dressed in white, her face seriously censoring his presence. He should have thought it strange for her to be there but, inexplicably, he did not. He was filled with the positive conviction that her presence was natural; no it was destiny that he should find her there. She belonged. More than that, her appearance made his heart race and he was seized with basic desire and emotion bordering on uncontrollable infatuation. He was intoxicated, fatally hypnotised.

"I have come to look," he said, at length. "To look for mineral samples, you know." The sun grew hotter and burned his skin, but they stood motionless. Time passed, what seemed to Len like a lifetime, as statuesquely they studied one another.

"Minerals?" said the enchantress, shading her eyes.

"Rocks, crystals, ore, that sort of thing," he said, stepping forward as if to embrace her. She did not answer but in one graceful motion moved backwards and reached down. As she stood, Len could see that she was holding a large rock, cradled like an infant in her arms.

"Look no more," she said softly. "This is all you seek. This is all you ever sought. Please take it, just this, and leave." She held the rock out at arm's length with the dignity and majesty of a priestess in the act of divine immolation. Almost reluctantly, Len took the oblation and turned into the sun to examine it. He was puzzled by its lightness and unable to identify its composition. It was disappointingly drab and ordinary in appearance, and he turned to elaborate on his quest. He found no-one. The girl had completely vanished.

Anxiously he ran forward, scanning the view, searching the undergrowth, anxious for a glimpse of the fair head or a flash of the dress, but it was all in vain. There was no sign of the young woman who, seconds before, had so entranced him. Engulfed by frustration, disappointment and righteous disapproval, he turned again to re-examine the rock she had handed him. In a moment of pique he raised it above his head as if to dash it to the ground, but his mood softened and he slipped it into his rucksack. He stood for a while, looking around him, but he was alone and, shrugging his shoulders, he armed himself with his chipping hammer and started up the slope. As he climbed, to his delight and escalating excitement, he found a number of extraordinary samples. With great care he wrapped them and placed them in the rucksack, which grew heavier. The sun grew hotter and when he reached a grassy bank he decided it was time to rest and eat the packed lunch he had carried with him from the Inn. He could remember sitting down, but then

Len rubbed his chin and massaged his cheeks. Clearly, he had fallen asleep there, on the bank, which was a stupid thing to do in the sunlight. A glance at his watch made his heart leap. It was nearly half-past-four! He had been asleep there, exposed, for several hours and he would now have to start the painful, difficult, journey back down the valley. Perhaps if he headed for the stream, that would cool him down.

Had it all been a dream, then, the girl and the rock? What of his journey there, had he imagined it all? Suddenly inspired he rummaged in the rucksack and there it was, at the bottom, the piece of rock she had handed him. That was real enough! What, then, about the girl? How had she got there? She must have come from a nearby cottage. There was one marked on the map not far away, out of sight over the brow of the hill behind the engine house. There would have to be a

path up there, and that might be an easier way to get out rather than have to fight his way back through all the undergrowth and gorse.

He studied the rock again. It was quite unexceptional apart from its lightness. Why had he taken it? What was more, why was he carrying it about with him? Why did he not just throw it away? If he met her again, he could always say that it was at the bottom of the rucksack. With a sigh he placed it back in the rucksack near the top. He looked up. The great engine house of Wheal Margaret beckoned. Drawn by its magnetism he involuntarily recommenced his climb, at first stuffing items into and filling the rucksack until he was forced to stop because he could not fit any more samples in. The hammer fell and slid down the slope but he did not turn to watch it go. As he climbed higher, the rucksack appeared to grow heavier until, almost crippled by its weight, he gained the broad plateau on which the buildings had stood and he was able to drop it to the ground. It was just too heavy. He would have to lighten it.

An insane impulse possessed him. He took out the rock that she had given him and started to carry it towards the engine house. In the heat it appeared to increase in mass, swelling, growing denser, impeding his progress. Determined, Len struggled and mounted a small rise in the ground. He found himself standing on a circular bank which funnelled down away from him into a gaping hole. It was one of the shafts, possibly the main one, possibly the one. The rock bore him down, weakening his knees, compressing his limbs. It was as if it were animate, attempting to stop him from moving any farther, any closer.

His strength was greater than this mysteriously magnified gravitational force. Calling, mentally, on the mine to claim and take back its own he rashly raised the rock again, high above his head and, with a supreme effort, he hurled it into the chasm. As he did, the ground trembled and slid away beneath his feet. For a brief moment, the scenery flashed and rotated, bright; then he plunged into a dense, dark, agony.

When he opened his eyes again, Len was aware of the echoey sound of water running and dripping. Seized by the spasm of convulsive molten pain he turned his head and gasped. In the green half-light he could see the rock that had fallen close by and which had broken into a number of fragments. As he slowly extended his handless arm towards it, eternal night descended.

“Such a terrible thing, my dear,” said Martha, sadly, to a woman from the village. “When he'd not returned by nightfall and his little car was still here, well, we had to call Mr Anderson in. He said it was a job for the authorities from Cambourne and they came out. Of course, it was dark and they didn't start their search until first light. Oh yes, they found him easily enough, in the glade at the end of the path, beside Maggie's tomb. Mr Anderson said that it looked as if he had removed a stone from the bottom and it had collapsed on him. It was awful as one of the blocks of granite cut his hand clean off. Mr Anderson said he thought he'd been knocked out and then just bled to death, though he probably never knew anything about it! Terrible isn't it?” The listener nodded gravely, but said nothing. “You wouldn't believe the strangest thing, though,” continued Martha in a hushed whisper. The rock he'd taken out was beside him when they found him, cracked open. According to Mr Anderson it was packed with enormous crystals of amethyst veined with bands of gold. Quite exceptional, according to an expert who came out from Cambourne. What happened to it? Oh, there was no question of that. It's up there still. They put it back in the tomb, my dear. No-one would dream of bringing it down. It came from Margaret's mine.”

THE END