

A path winds its way upwards from a sheltered valley, climbing steeply against the flow of a tumbling stream onto the exposed moorland. On a summer's day, the vast skies complement the shades of green of gorse, bracken and friendlier vegetation, making any journey pleasant. But once the nights begin to draw in and the shadows creep ever shorter, the bracken crisps and the yellow of the gorse fades to a colour less vivid and the path promises more demands of its users. The trek across the moors is now hurried, the walkers huddled beneath the metal-grey skies, afraid of their belongings being snatched by an insistent wind, determined to rob them of their cargo.

The Hooting Carn rests upon the horizon, offering some shelter if needed though few divert their steps to the black rocks. Stories claim it is haunted, holding the souls of those who lost their way, physically and emotionally, so no one wants to rest there with the suggestion of a shrill, persistent whistle perhaps not entirely caused by the wind. The decision is always to press on, carrying the precious metal which has taken so much of their strength to extract from the earth. They trudge in the middle of the moor, grateful that the shadow cast by the Carn will not reach them, yet still averting their gaze... just in case there might be something to see. Their clothes may be damp from a swirling mist or they may feel the cutting ice of the wind slicing through their thin coats but they will not stop.

The path helps them on their way. It is an ancient path and over the centuries it has become well-defined by the boots of those who use it. There are way markers, some man-made, others a natural part of the landscape which help the men along the way though, if truth be told, they can and have traversed it by moonlight, so familiar are they with it. They hitch their precious packs higher on their shoulders and continue along the soft path, leaving the Carn behind them, breathing more calmly now the probability of ghosts has passed.

Edward leads the way and he is tired. He is looking forward to handing over the responsibility of hauling the tin to a younger man, and he knows the very person who will benefit from him standing down. Will has worked the mine at Wheal Owles from an early age and, now grown to a strong man with a young wife, Edward recognises that the time has come to pass on one of the secrets of the Tinnners' Way. He has already spoken to Will and he is happy to take on the position of lead-man: the other miners respect Will as they respect Edward, safe in the knowledge that the route will be followed truly. They are as one, these men who dig deep beneath the surface in the dark. They do not need to speak of their secret as all understand the enormity of the consequences if it were to be revealed to anyone beyond their tight group.

Eight men follow the path between two high hedges, grateful for the small shelter they offer from the wind. They have entered a tunnel: the scudding clouds above form a canopy, stars blinking like watchful eyes, eager to see what the men are about. The stones in the hedges are covered by mosses and lichen. Thick cloaks of bramble spill onto the path and it appears as if the stones have their own garments to keep them warm. However there is the odd bare patch of granite, and it is before one of these such patches that Edward stops and removes his heavy load. The others follow his lead and all breathe a little easier.

Edward reaches over the verge and places his hands on a large rock. He lifts it upwards and then tilts it forwards, its own weight allowing it to pivot on the stone below and it slides effortlessly into his arms. He turns and puts it carefully on the path. It is a beautiful piece of granite, one flat edge smooth and shiny, as though it has been worked by masons. Edward then moves closer to the gap in the hedge and reaches inside, one arm buried for a moment and then pulled out, clutching a rough sack, largely empty

but with something heavy at its base.

The miners have released the ties on their packs. As one, they remove a small piece of the precious mineral they are transporting and place it on the rock, rather like an offering on an altar. Edward scrutinises the pieces, ascertaining they are all of a similar weight, then, nodding his assent, steps back. The pieces are small: their loss won't be noticed when the packs are weighed.

Will opens the sack which had been hidden in the hedge. He puts in his hand and pulls out a large fistful of silvery crystals, as though the stars above have been captured. He hands over the pile to Edward: this is the informal ceremony to announce the transference of leadership. Edward receives them with a nod and wraps them in a cloth before tucking them into his coat pocket. This is his payment for services rendered: let's call it a bonus for the thousands of hours he has spent underground and the hundreds of miles he has walked this path to allow other men to line their pockets on the back of his labour.

All the men present know that their 'bonus' is waiting for them, hidden in the hedge. One day, when they too are tired and worn, they will receive their share and their retirement will be just that little bit more comfortable. The minerals are taken from the stone, placed in the sack and the hedge is suddenly as it was, keeping its secrets as the miners continue on the path to the port.

*By Barbara Armstrong*