

## THE RETURN OF THE BAKER

*Edwin Tregear*

Unlike so many, I came home in July. Some of the lads got off the train at Exeter, some at Plymouth. I must have gone to sleep. I woke at Penzance, my stop, when someone shouted, "End of the line, mate."

Mr Olds was outside the station in the trap; that was a godsend. It was a long walk to St Just.

"Edwin Tregear. Well I never," he said. Indeed, that's all he said for the first five minutes of our journey. "Edwin Tregear the baker. Well I never."

There was bunting outside the cottages. Kiddies with flags. "'Spect you're glad to see that then?" Mr Olds said, waving at the kiddies. I didn't wave, just held my bag on my knee.

Mr Olds asked questions. "'Spect you'll be baking again?"

I looked at my hands and tried to imagine them twisting dough into pretty plaits for the mine owner's wife. I couldn't. Still saw them trying to hold a rifle steady.

"Maybe not, Mr Olds. Maybe I need to do something else."

"They are recruiting up Levant," he said.

It would not be long before we saw the first mine chimneys, the first engine houses.

I shut my eyes. "I dare say," I said.

Later, there was the sound of voices, excited, and Mr Olds tapped me on the shoulder. "You awake, lad?" We were passing through Newbridge. More kiddies, more flags.

We passed a small stone house on the road outside Newbridge. No bunting here. Front door closed. Curtains drawn. Mr Olds didn't take his eyes off the pony's hindquarters, just flicked the reins. "Young Matty Harris, shot for desertion. 'Spect you know."

It was cold, suddenly. I shut my eyes again. The trap lurched, bumping me and Mr Olds together like dice in a shaker. Then I had to stop. And before he could rein in the pony, I half fell into the mud, knelt and retched.

When it was over, I leaned against the wheel of the trap, shaking, wiping my mouth on my sleeve, just breathing.

But then there was no trap, no Mr Olds, no pony. My wrists were raw, tied to another wheel with a strap, my arms stretched wide, pulled almost out of their sockets. A young lad's body being dragged away, his head not quite covered, mouth open like he was trying to say something. His boots gouging small furrows through a different mud.

"You alright lad?" Mr Olds said.

I think I nodded.

What a homecoming it was - even if home was just a room above a bakery.

What do I remember? The village kiddies grown so much, lifting paper chains up round my neck. The hottest, sweetest tea served in the best Royal Albert cups. A great cake decorated with flags and *Welcome Home Edwin* piped no doubt by Baker Jebb.

Baker Jebb himself - so old, his hands trembling. Mrs Baker Jebb, unchanged, red-faced, hair white as good flour.

“We kept your room exactly...”

I remember how the bakery door flew open, neighbours pushing to slap me on the back, shake my hand.

“Welcome, welcome back.” Pots of jam, bottles of home brewed beer. I remember some lads rapping on the window, sticks over their shoulders, grinning: “What’s it like killing Germans?” and Mrs Baker Jebb shooing them away.

I remember the brass band playing a bit ragged in the square. Less three cornets, the tuba and the bandmaster.

The publican from The Tinnars’ carried round a gallon jug. “A soldier needs more than tea now, Mrs Jebb.”

Later, after the homecoming, I went up to my old room. I could not sleep. The bedstead creaked with every movement, it seemed. But I must have slept in the end, as it was late when I woke to the smell of flour and yeast heavy in the air.

I lay there, stretched my arms up towards the roof, flexing my fingers like I used to, get them ready for kneading. I did not go downstairs for a while. Then, when I did go down, I stood in the doorway, watching Baker Jebb setting the early loaves to rise. It was so, so familiar.

Baker Jebb looked up eventually, wiping his hands on his apron.

“Edwin - been waiting on this day. ’Bout time you took the place over, then?”

“I’m sorry, Mr Jebb,” I said. “I don’t think I can do that, not now.”

It was not easy, that conversation. Baker Jebb came over and held his hands up for me to see. Old, twisted. “Painful, they are,” he said. “Been waiting on you, Edwin.”

I didn’t reply.

“Best baker in Cornwall, you were,” he said “Never seen a lad take to baking like you done. I can’t be doing much more.”

True enough, I loved baking, before. I loved the feel of the dough. The smells, rich and round, the sweetness of sugar, the sharpness of orange and lemon peel. The depth of saffron for the saffron bread. Its colour.

But not with these hands. Not now.

“I’m sorry, Mr Jebb,” I said. “I’m going down Levant, if they’ll have me.”

The mine manager's office was not that different to the recruiting office in St Ives. One thing was different though. In the corner of the mine office there was a great boulder on display, lines of tin and copper ore running through.

A sign:

*A time to cast away stones*

*a time to gather stones together*

Mr Nicholas sat behind his desk and looked at me over his glasses.

"Recently back from the War, isn't that right?"

I nodded.

A hooter sounded somewhere in the mine. It echoed like the whine of shells and the howls of half-men.

"Ah," he said. "Well, you look fit enough to me. Monday next, five thirty."

He gave me some papers, told me that I'd have linen trews and tunic supplied by the mine, one set every six months. One strong hat and candles. I was to bring my own boots, food and match tins.

Then he said,

"The first week you'll have a helping hand with Fritz."

I half laughed. "Fritz?"

"Ah. The man-engine. The mechanical lift down the mine. Boche contraption. Been here for years."

"They get everywhere," I said.

I must have looked like a daisy the next Monday, my work clothes so painfully new. The older miners' clothes - stained red from the clay - were stiff from a night over the hot pipes in the dry. That dry stank. Sweat.

There was a man sitting at a table taking down who was at work. The Marker, he was called.

"Make your mark," he said. I signed my name. He looked up.

I had trouble with my strong hat when I loaded the brim with clay and candle. The whole thing felt as though it would fall off any second, and I must have been holding my head at an angle until a small man with a broken nose said to stand up straight while I could.

"Jarvis," he said. "No Miners' Federation here... I run something like it, unofficially. See you afterwards for your dues." Then I dropped my food and match tins in the passageway. I held up the line of men waiting for their turn on Fritz, until Jarvis grinned and showed me the knack of holding both tins in one hand, leaving the other free to grasp the handles of the man-engine.

Extraordinary contraption. Beam engine in the engine house up top. Then a great wooden rod that rose and fell over and over again in the shaft, little ledges fixed to the rod, made to take a miner's boots.

The noise was deafening. Thudding and hissing, shouts. My ears rang with it all. I watched as the man in front grasped a handle on the rod, stepped forward, then disappeared, standing, down into the darkness.

I stood on the wooden platform, feeling it give slightly under my weight. I reached for the metal handle as it rose back up, my boot found a ledge on the rod, the rod plunged, and my breakfast nearly reappeared. Twelve feet. Then the rod slowed and Jarvis shouted from above to step off... "Backwards!"

I stepped back and my foot met a platform on the side of the shaft. I forgot to let go. My arm was jerked upwards as the rod rose...

"Let go, man!" Jarvis shouted. I did, and just stood there, shaking. I peered between the boards; could just see another platform below mine. The candle on the strong hat of the man below.

Half an hour, this journey would take. Half an hour to the bottom, Hundred and fifty men at once, they said.

Then other sounds. First the hiss and thud of that beam engine up at ground level, getting fainter the deeper we sank. The scrape of hobnails on wood, as the column of men slid on and off their perches. Coughs.

Then singing, the men's voices rising up the shaft for all the world as though angels had fallen into the dark. Slow pieces, chapel hymns, the words all lost as the music bounced round the walls and echoed down the adits.

Someone was singing loudly, out of tune.

"He's a voice that'd crack granite..." shouted a voice from the below. And another replied: "Perfect! Bring him along here... let the man sing... do my work for me nice."