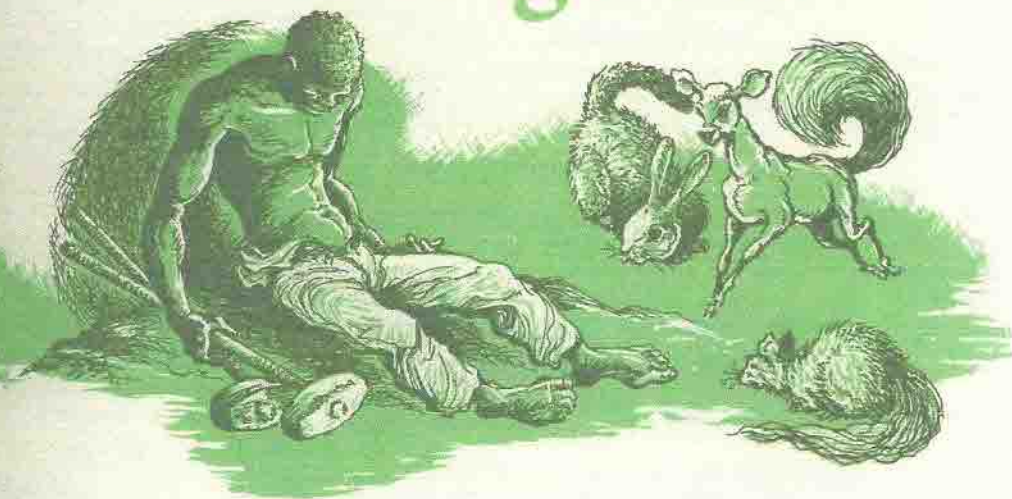


# THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARJORIE BARROWS, *Editor*

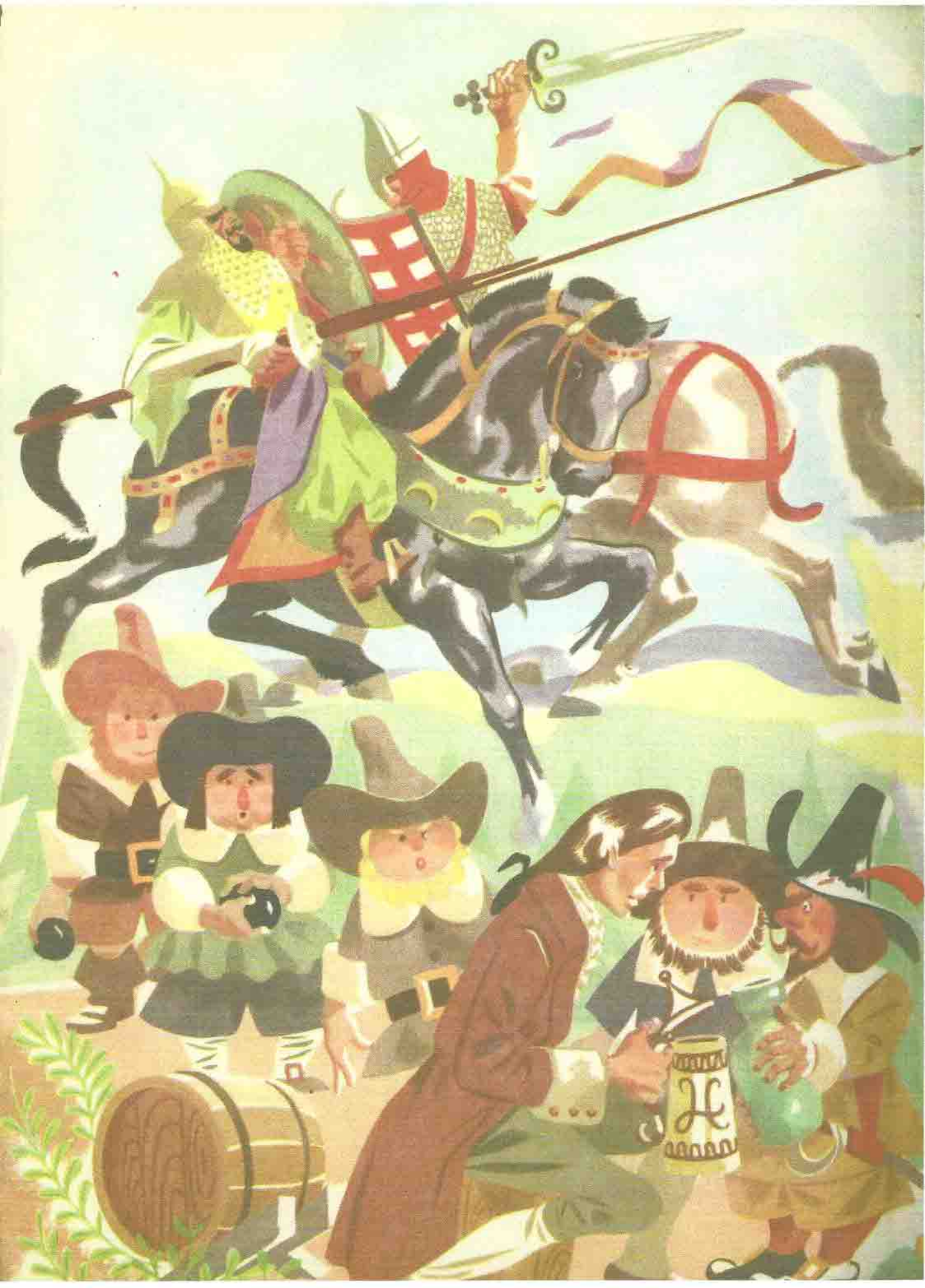
## Myths and Legends



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GROLIER INCORPORATED • *New York*



## Part I: FOR YOUNGER READERS

A CORNISH TALE



*Enys Tregarthen*

### BUCCA BOO'S LITTLE MERRY MEN

ILLUSTRATED BY *John Dukes McKee*

**N**EARLY everybody in Mevagissey had heard of Bucca Boo, the Neptune of the Cornish sea, and how he had commanded his nine little mermen to row in their longboat to a large rock pool near one of Mevagissey's high cliffs. There, cormorants and gulls nested, and a rare weed called the Weed of Health grew. The Mevagissey people had also heard that whoever was lucky enough to see the wonderful little boat, curved like a moon on her back, and bring her inside Mevagissey Quay would bring good luck to himself and the whole fishing town.

No one believed the old whiddle any more except Merlin Legassick, an ancient fisherman, and his grandson and namesake. Old Merlin declared that his great-granfer had seen such a boat come into the basin, but as he was crippled in his legs he could not climb up the slippery sides of the rock and so lost the chance of getting the little craft and bringing her into the quay.

This old whiddle had made a great impression on the younger Merlin, and it was the one desire of his heart to see the little boat his great-great-grandfather had seen, so he watched for her coming at each flow of the tide.

In those days the people of Mevagissey were all fisherfolk and exceedingly poor, owing to the scarcity of fish. Most of them knew, more often than not, the pangs of hunger. Old Merlin Legassick and his children and grandchildren were some

of the worst sufferers, as they were a large family and, being so many to share the little food there was, they had often to go supperless to bed.

As the fishing grew worse and worse, Merlin the elder and Merlin the younger longed more and more for the coming of the little boat into Bucca Boo's Basin, for it would turn the luck of the fishing from bad to good if only one of them could see her there and get hold of her. But, in spite of all their watching and longing, she had not yet come into the pool.

The younger Merlin was beginning to despair of her ever coming at all. The elder Merlin was often a bit down in the mouth too, only he would not allow it and cheered his little grandson by telling him that she was bound to put into the basin sometime, adding impressively, "'Tis a prize worth waiting for even if she don't come till you be as ould and gray-headed as your granfer."

Neither Merlin went fishing. The old man was too feeble and the boy too young, but the former mended the fishing nets, and the little lad got the bait to supply the hooks. Late one afternoon in the beginning of June when the larks were thrilling the blue air with their melodies and Mevagissey cliffs were a sight to see, with the pink of the thrifts and the red and gold of the lady's fingers, old Merlin sent his namesake to Polstreath beach to dig sprats in the great stretch of sand there.

As the lad was leaving the cottage on the cliffside, the grand-sire begged him to keep an extra lookout for the dinky longboat.

"'Tis such handsome weather," he said, "an' the sea from Rame's Head to Chapel Point is like a millpond a'most. Which-ever way the little merry men be pleased to come, they will be able to get into the bay as easy as any of our own boats."

Old Merlin's manner was so eager and his voice so earnest that the boy, instead of going to Polstreath as he was bidden, went to Bucca Boo's Basin. When he got there the tide had not yet reached the rock where the pool was, but it was flowing fast toward it. The sea was rougher than his grandfather had allowed him to expect, and waves were breaking against the northern cliffs, which were by far the boldest in the bay.

“The wee chaps and their dinky longboat won’t come today, that’s certain,” said the boy to himself, a look of disappointment on his bright young face as he stood gazing seaward. “If they don’t make haste granfer an’ me won’t be alive to watch, for we shall soon die of hunger, an’ all the other folk in Mevagissey will, too.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a laugh from somewhere close to him stole upon his ear. At first he thought it was the giggle of a kittiwake, which often laughs as it flies over the cliffs, but as it was followed by a chorus of tiny voices singing he knew it could not be. Much wondering what it was, young Merlin listened intently, and as he listened it dawned upon him that it *might* be Bucca Boo’s little merry men come into the basin at last.

No sooner had this idea taken possession of his mind than he climbed up the side of the rock and peeped into the pool. There, to his unspeakable delight, was a tiny boat not much bigger than a child’s toy and curved like a moon on her back.



The little craft was full of tiny men with scarlet caps on their dark heads, for all the world like inverted sea anemones. Jumpers clung tight to their slim figures which, when they moved, were all sparkle and color like a mackerel's back.

"'Tis the boat I've been on the lookout for all this time," young Merlin said joyfully to himself as he watched her riding on the swirling water under the shadow of the basin's side, "and my chance is come at last to bring good luck to Mevagissey and the fishing!"

As he said this, wondering how he could get hold of the tiny craft, all the little men began laughing and chaffing each other. Then one of them broke out into a rollicking song with a chorus in which they all joined.

"With a dally rally O!  
With a rally dally O!  
In their longboat O!"

Merlin, as he listened, could scarcely refrain from joining in, too, the air was so catching and as fresh as the breeze blowing in from the sea.

When they had finished their song, they gripped their oars and began to row the boat across the pool to where Merlin was looking over it, motionless as the basin itself. Merlin held his breath as she came, waiting to grip her when she got under the basin's brim. The dinky crew were so intent on their rowing that they did not notice the brown handsome face of the lad who was watching them. When the boat was within a yard or so from where Merlin was sitting, the little man at the helm suddenly pointed to something glowing like flame under the rim of the basin.

"It is the Weed of Health," he cried.

"So it is," responded all the little men, suspending their slender oars to gaze at the burning weed.

"How are we to get it?" asked one anxiously.

"That's the question," replied the helmsman. "If I can measure distance with my eye, I'm afraid it is far out of our reach."

"In that case our coming here is all in vain," said one of the crew in a dismal voice. "Our Bucca Boo will never be himself again, and that horrid Bee Bo will sit on the great pearl throne instead."

"It is terrible to think of," said another. "If only we had legs made for climbing, as those great men-creatures have who live in yonder town," he sighed, turning his face in the direction of Mevagissey.

"Do not look at the black side of things until you are so obliged," the helmsman commented severely.

"Let's go and have a closer view," piped a little voice. "It may not be so un-get-at-able as we fear."

"Yes, let us," they all cried.

When Merlin saw the boat turn round and make for the spot where the weed was burning as bright as a field of poppies, he pulled himself back very gently and crept round to where the little craft was close in to the basin's wall. As soon as he dared peep over the pool, he saw that the little merry men were looking anything but merry. Gazing at each other in silent dismay, they sat for five minutes or more, when a voice broke the silence with a cry of hope.

"Why, how stupid we are! The sea will flow into the basin soon after sundown, and the basin will be so full of water that it will be easy to reach the beautiful weed."

"You forget that the weed blossoms and ripens only two hours before the sun posts westward," said the steersman sadly, "and it is within half an hour of that time now."

"I had forgotten that," the small man murmured.

"And we must therefore give up all hope of taking back the Weed of Health to our dear Bucca Boo," piped another little voice, wist as the cry of a gull proclaiming a storm.

"We shall never dare show our faces in Bucca Boo Town without the weed," said an oarsman, shaking his scarlet-capped head. "I, for one, could not bear to see the despair in Bucca's eyes nor the look of triumph in Bee Bo's. Bee must have known when we sailed away to this place that the Weed of Health was growing where we feetless little men could never get it."

When Merlin, who was a feeling-hearted little chap, heard what Bucca Boo's nine merry men said, he felt sorry for them and almost lost sight of his own troubles in theirs. The moment, however, they stopped talking and sat looking at each other, the thought of the hungry ones in Mevagissey came over him. Telling himself that now was his opportunity to bring good luck to everybody in the little fishing town, he crooked his bare feet in the outer rim of the basin and let himself gently down its seaweed-covered side.

As he hung head downward his full length and was stretching out his hands to grasp the boat, one of her crew looked up and saw him. He uttered a cry of warning, and in a moment of time the boat and her crew were far from the boy's outflung hands. Merlin pulled himself up from his undignified position amid roars of laughter from the nine little merry men.

"You thought you had got us nicely, didn't you?" asked the helmsman, doffing his bright cap in derision. "Perhaps you will be a bit slower in your movements the *next time* Bucca Boo's merry men in their longboat come into the basin."

"I can get you now if I like," cried Merlin, who was a quick-tempered lad and did not at all like the way the little cock-a-hoop spoke to him. "I can dive like a shag and swim like a fish, and if I dive down there into the pool I can get you quite easily. It was only the fear of upsetting your little craft an' drowning 'ee all that stopped me. There now!"

The nine little merry men seemed vastly amused at the boy's boast and laughed till the salt tears rolled down their faces.

"It is quite too funny," cried one, wiping his eyes on the hem of his jumper.

"Yes, isn't it?" cried another. "Fancy his being afraid of *our* drowning!" and again they roared with laughter.

"'Tis no laughing matter," shouted Merlin, who was red as a boiled crab with anger. "I'll spring into the pool now and get 'ee."

"Do!" taunted the helmsman, who was evidently the spokesman of the longboat crew and a person of some importance. "But I think you will have as much difficulty in laying hold of our boat as you would of its reflection."



