

Tales from the Cornish Miners

Many people from Cornwall, England, came to work in the lead mines. They brought with them the stories of the knockers. Knockers were small mine spirits who could show miners good places to dig. Miners who heard their hammering or knocking would know where rich ore could be found.

The Cornish spoke English, but their English sounded different to Americans. Below are three Cornish stories told about the knockers.

One night I was workan' away for dear life, the sweat going over me like rain. I was in good heart, because for every stroke of my tool I heard three or four clicks from the knockers, workan' away ahead of me. By the sound they seemed to be very near. After a few strokes, the ground crumbled down loose and easy, and I found that I had broken into a vug (a hollow space in a lode). My eyes were dazzled at first with the glistening of the bunches of crystals of all colors which hung down from the roof and sides of the place, but when I rubbed my eyes and looked sharper into the inner end, there I spied three of the knockers. They were no bigger than a good sixpenny doll; yet in their faces, dress and movements they had the look of hearty old miners. I took the most notice of the one in the middle. He was settan' down on a stone, his jacket off, and his shirtsleeves rolled up. Between his knees he held a little anvil, no more than an inch square. In his left hand he held a boryer (rod for drilling holes) about the size of a darning needle, which he was

sharpening for one of the knockers whilst the other was waiting his turn to have his pick worked on. When the smith had finished the boryer, he rested the end of his hammer on the anvil, and looked towards me.

"What cheer, comrade" says he. "I couldn't think where the cold wind was coman' from and my light es blown out."

"Aw! good mornan' es that you? How are 'ee?" says I "and how is all the rest of the family? I'm brave and glad to see 'ee, and I'll fetch my candle in a wink. Your own es too small," says I, "for to stand the draft I've let into your shop, but I'll give 'ee a pound of my candles, my dear weth all my heart I will, ef you've a mind to have them!"

In less than no time I turned round again with my candle in my hand. But what dost think? When I look again into the vug there wasn't one of the knockers to be seen nor their tools neither. All I heard was the sound of them somewhere in the mine ahead, tee-hee-an and squeaking.

The miners often left a little of their lunch for the knockers. Sometimes the knockers became angry at the miners if no food was offered or if the miners whistled or swore underground. Angry knockers might hide the miners' tools, tangle ropes, or break ladders.

Instead of leaving food for the knockers, Tom, laughed at them, til one night at work in a place quite by himself he heard ever so many squeaking voices chant:

"Tom Trevorrow! Tom Trevorrow!
Leave some of thy cake for us
Or bad luck to thee, tomorrow!"

Tom's only reply was a shout "I'll scat (knock) your brains out." The knockers answered,

"Tommy Trevorrow! Tommy Trevorrow!
We'll send thy bad luck tomorrow!"

Tom was somewhat scared, but a little later he dozed off for a few minutes. When he woke up, he saw dozens of knockers resting on their tools; the tallest of them no more than three foot high. They had

long arms, big heads with gray or red hair, and beards. They laughed at him, then melted away like curling smoke.

Next day Tom and his son went to work in the mine. The boy was above ground working at the windlass while Tom was hammering in wooden timbers to hold up the rocks. Tom could plainly hear the kockers working against him. The longer he worked, the nearer the knockers came towards him until finally he saw the ground move. He called his son to pull him up, for dear life. By the time Tom reached the grass, the ground was tumbling in. Five seconds after he untied the rope from around his waist, everything - windlass, rope, tools and a month's work of ore had fallen down the shaft to be buried. All his work and time had gone for nothing!

The knockers were usually busy with their own mining, but they didn't like to be cheated.

At one mine, the knockers were always very busy. In every part of the mine their knockings were heard, but most especially in one particular end. The miners believed that great wealth must exist at this part of the mine, but no pair of men felt brave enough to work an area claimed by the knockers. An old man and his son went out one night near midnight and watched until they saw the "small people" bringing up the shining ore. It is said they had some secret way to talk with the knockers. Be this as it may, they told the knockers that they would save them the work of mining the ore and hauling it above ground. The old man and his

son would bring up and give ten percent of the richest ore to the knockers if they'd let him and his son work that part of the mine. An agreement of some kind was reached. The old man and his son worked that part of the mine, and in a short time became rich. The old man never failed to keep to his bargain, and leave the tenth of the ore for his knocker friends. He died. The son was greedy and selfish. He tried to cheat the knockers, but he ruined himself by doing so. The mine failed; nothing else worked; disappointed, he wasted all the money his father had made, and died a beggar.

These stories were collected in Southwestern Wisconsin about 1940 by the Wisconsin Folklore Society. Cousin Jack was a nickname for Cornish miners.

CATS

A miner living in a shanty in a holler near Hazel Green, had a number of cats. For their convenience in entering and leaving the house he had several holes cut in the bottom of the door, small holes for the kittens and larger holes for the full-grown cats. A stranger visiting this home

asked about the holes and was told that they were for the use of the cats. The visitor then asked why there were so many holes, he thought that one opening should be enough for all the cats. "Well," said Cousin Jack, thee doean't understand. When I say scat, I mean **SCAT!**

The Cornish sometimes added the "H" sound to some words that started with a vowel and then dropped the "H" sound off other words.

THE HAMMER HANDLE

Mr Howe, a farmer living near Mineral Point had a broken handle on his hammer. He told his hired man, a young Cornishman, to make a new one. The young man took the hammer to the woodshed, but soon returned and asked his employer; "What's best, hash, hoak, hor helm to make an 'ammer 'andle?"

walking past the home of a settler he was suddenly set upon by a dog who growled and showed his teeth. While he was trying to defend himself by swinging the bag about, the owner of the dog called out "That dorg won't bite, e's waggin' 'es tail!"

"I knoaw that," replied Cousin Jack, "E's waggin' 'es tail at one hend and barkin' at the hother. I doan't know which of 'es hends to believe."

COUSIN JACK AND THE DOG

A Cornish miner was trudging to town with a bag over his shoulder to buy some supplies. In

The first two knocker stories came from *Cornwall and Its People* by A. K. Hamilton Jenkin in 1949. The third story came from *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*, 1976 edited by Katherine Briggs. The collection from Southwestern Wisconsin is *Cousin Jack Stories* by Charles E. Brown, the Wisconsin Folklore Society in 1940