

Two Giants

RETOLD BY EDNA O'BRIEN

The world of myth and legend is full of wondrous beings with greater power than mortals, but with human problems. Often, like the giant and his wife in this Irish folktale, they must resort to trickery to survive.

Finn was the biggest and the bravest giant in all of Ireland. His deeds were known far and wide, lions lay down before him, his chariot flashed like a comet through the fields of battle, and with his 'Venomous' Sword he lay low a hundred men while with the other hand casting his sling at a troop of deer or a herd of wild boar. Along with that he had a thumb of knowledge and when he sucked this thumb he could tell what was happening anywhere in Ireland and he could foretell future encounters. Now when Finn was no longer young, the rumour went about that there was a giant in Scotland who was Finn's equal and his name was McConigle. McConigle was not only fierce in battle, but when he walked up a hill the earth trembled under his feet, the trees wobbled, and the wild game fled to their lairs. By one blow of his fist he flattened a thunderbolt one day, turned it into the shape of a pancake, and kept it in his pocket as a souvenir. He too had a way of prophesizing by putting his middle finger into his mouth and sucking on it. Now the two giants had never met but it was reported that McConigle intended to come over to Ireland, to fight Finn and to give him a pasting.

It so happened that one day Finn and his men were away from home and were busy making a bridge across the Giant's Causeway. In the distance they could see a messenger galloping towards them and Finn wondered if his wife Oonagh had taken sick or if there had been some breach in their fortifications at home. The messenger announced that Finn was to come home at once and then whispered something in Finn's ear that made him tremble with rage.

"So he's on my trail," said Finn as he stood up and with that he pulled up a



big fir tree, banged the clay off it and with his knife snedded it into a walking stick, so that it was both a walking stick and an umbrella. To see Finn walk was like seeing a mountain move and in no time he was across one country and heading toward home. He was going up a slope when in the mud he saw foot marks which were as big as his own. In fact they were the exact shape as his own and Finn thought "Lo" and had his first feeling of terror and doubt. Never before had he come across a giant the length and breadth of whose feet were as enormous as his own. He widened his chest and let out an almighty roar just to make his presence felt, and it echoed all over the valley and was heard by his wife in her own home.

Finn's palace was on the top of a hill called Knockmany and it looked out on another mountain called Culamore and there was a deep gorge in between. Finn had settled there so that he could see his enemies a long way off and as well as that he could throw the bodies of his prey into the gorge for the crows to fatten themselves on.

"Oh my bilberry," said Finn as he saw his wife Oonagh who had plaited her hair and put on a silk dress to please him. At once Finn asked if the reason she had sent for him was true.

"Tis true, Avick," said Oonagh and went on to tell him how McConigle had pitched tent at the far side of the province and had his famous thunderbolt in the shape of a pancake in his pocket, and called himself The Invincible. Finn put his thumb into his mouth to verify all these things and found that they were true. He could only use his gift of prophecy on very trying and solemn occasions such as this was.

"Finn darling, don't bite your thumb," said Oonagh very sweetly as she led him into the house where there was a dinner prepared. Finn squatted at one end of the low table, Oonagh at the other, and along with maidens to wait on them there were harpists playing in order to soothe Finn. He started by having sixteen duck eggs, eight pigs' crubeens, and three raw onions for his digestion. The main course was a haunch of roast venison and it was so long that it stretched between them down the length of the table, a sizzling roast dotted with berries and all sorts of herbs. But no matter how much he ate or drank there was a frown on Finn's forehead and a big brown ridge like a furrow on the bridge of his nose because of his thinking.

"Dearest," said Oonagh as she bobbled along and began to stroke his great naked back. Finn always removed his cloak before he sat down to eat.

"You'll best him, you always do," said Oonagh, but Finn shook his head and said it was perilous because according to his thumb he and McConigle had equal amounts of strength, ate the same amount of food, weighed the same, and were equally matched in daring, wisdom, and cunning.

"What else does it say?" Oonagh asked and Finn put his thumb right inside his mouth and shut his eyes in order to concentrate.

"Take care you don't draw blood," said Oonagh.

"He's coming," said Finn. "He's below in Dungannon," and at that he jumped up.

"When will he be here?" said Oonagh.

"He'll be here before long," said Finn and he began to put his vest and his jacket on. He looked at his wife and for the first time she saw fear and apprehension in his eyes. She decided that she would have to help him and make use of her own enchantments. Oonagh was in with the fairies too and with her wand had once turned a hussy into a hound. She told Finn that she would help him to succeed.

"How, how," said Finn, hitting the table and sending delph in all directions.

Oonagh hurried out of the doorway in order to give a message to her sister who lived on the opposite mountain at Culamore.

"Grania," said Oonagh, "are you at home?"

"I'm in the kitchen garden," said Grania. "I'm picking berries for a tart."

"Run up to the top of the hill and look about you and tell us if you see anything untoward," said Oonagh. They waited for a few minutes with Finn pacing up and down and servants fanning him with great leaves.

"I am there now," said Grania.

"What do you see?" said Oonagh.

"Oh lawsie me," exclaimed Grania, "I see the biggest giant I've ever seen coming out of the town of Dungannon."

"What is he like?" said Oonagh.

"He's something terrible to behold," said Grania and went on to describe a giant of about four metres in height, his hair all the way down to his waist, his face ruddy like any giant's except that he had daubed blood over it and, most unnerving of all, his three eyes. He had an eye in the middle of his head that was rolling round like the hands of a clock. Not only was the ground shaking beneath him but the birds in the trees were dying of fright. Along with that he was laughing out loud as if he had just heard the most hilarious joke.

"He's coming up to leather Finn," said Oonagh to her sister.

"Finn has my sympathy," said Grania and then she just announced that the giant had picked up a white goat and was wringing its neck and was obviously going to eat it raw.

"I'll tell you what," said Oonagh, "call down to him and invite him up to your place for a bite to eat."

"Why so?" said Finn, unable to follow his wife's drift of thought.

"Strategy," said Oonagh, "strategy."

Grania called across to say she'd be glad to oblige and she'd entertain the monster but she was a bit short of bacon and of butter.

"I'll fling you some across," said Oonagh and she snapped her fingers for a servant to bring a flitch of bacon and a firkin of butter. However, before throwing them she forgot to say her charms and didn't the butter and the bacon fall into a stream and get carried away.

"Never mind," said Grania, "I'll give him heather soup and I'll put shredded bark in it to give him indigestion."

"Good on you," said Oonagh and she winked at Finn.

"He'll skewer me," said Finn.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Oonagh although to tell you the truth she could see a situation where she herself might be a dainty morsel, a little fritter for the giant's supper.

"My courage is leaving me, I'll be disgraced," said Finn.

"Two heads are better than one," said Oonagh as she went towards the place where she kept her magic threads. She drew nine woollen threads of different colours, she plaited them into three plaits, with three colours in each one; she put a plait on her right arm, another round her right ankle, a third round her heart, and in that way Oonagh was protected. Then she got going. She asked the servants to go up in the loft and bring down iron griddles and a child's cradle. She got them to make cakes but she hid the griddles inside the cakes and then baked them in the fire in the usual way. When they were done she dusted them over with flour so as to hide any protuberances and she put them on the window to cool. Then she put down a large pot of milk which she later made into curds and whey and showed Finn how to pick up a curd in his hand and make it smooth as a stone. Then she got a nightgown and a shawl and dressed Finn in it and put a nightcap on his head. She told him that he would have to get into the cradle and completely cover himself with clothes, with only his two eyes peering out.

"I can't fit in a cradle," said Finn.

"You'll have to double up," said Oonagh.

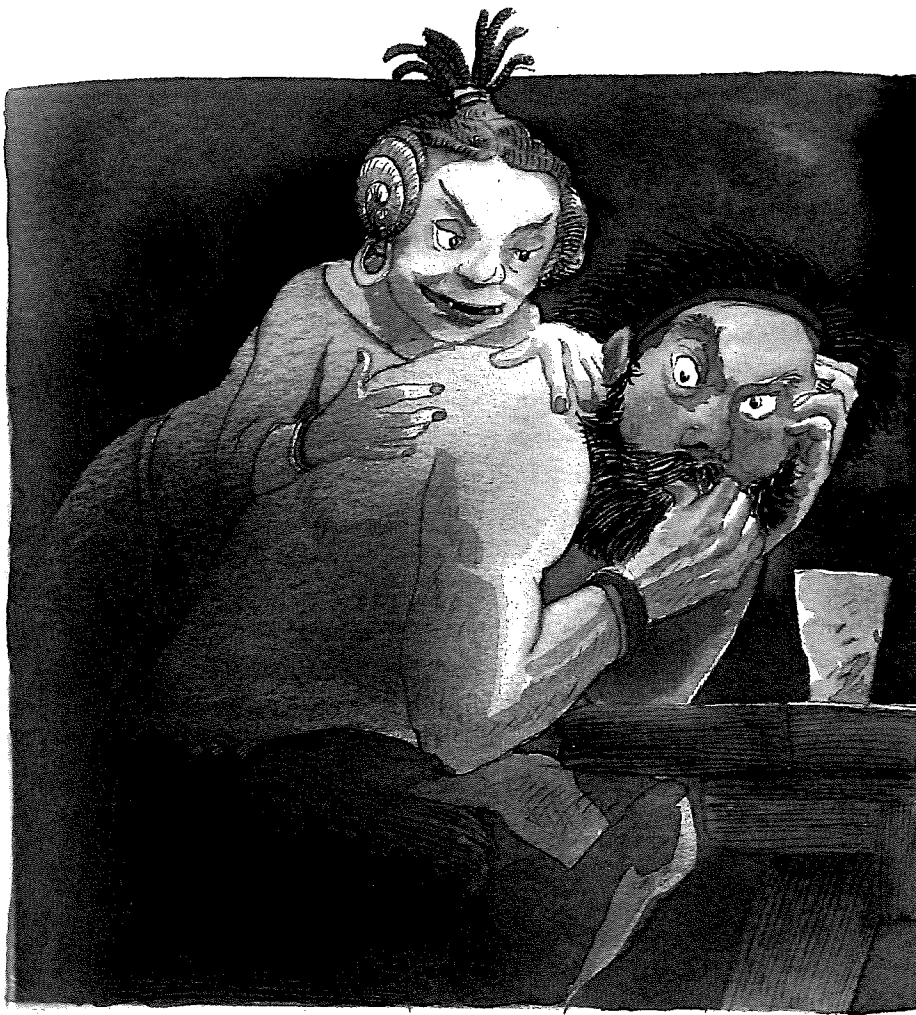
"I'll have to triple up," said Finn as she pushed him towards it.

"You must pass for your own child," said Oonagh.

"But I'm not a child," said Finn and he was afraid that he had taken the cowardice too far. Oonagh ignored his mutterings and just put him into the cradle and covered him up with great wool blankets and red deerskins.

"What do I do?" said Finn.

"Whist," said Oonagh because they could hear the bruiser coming up the hill and giving a skelp of his axe to the dogs to shut them up. He strutted across



the courtyard and when he arrived at their door he put a hand around either oak pillar and bellowed, "Anyone home?"

Oonagh came forward all shy and mincing and gave a little gasp to signify to him how formidable he was. He had rat skins and coon skins dangling from his ears and his third eye was rolling about like a spinning top.

"Mr. McConigle," said Oonagh.

"The great McConigle," said the giant and then asked if he was in the house of Finn.

"Indeed you are," said Oonagh and gestured towards a chair to make him welcome.

"You're Mrs. Finn I suppose," said the giant.

"I am," said she, "and a proud wife at that."

"Thinks he's the toughest giant in Ireland," said McConigle.

"It's a proven fact," said his wife proudly.

"There's a man within a metre of you that's very desirous of having a tussle with him," said McConigle and he looked around in order to sniff out his rival. "Is he hiding from me?" he asked.

"Hiding?" said Oonagh. "He left here frothing, he's gone out to find you and it's lucky for you you didn't meet him, or you'd be a dead man now, your head on his pike as an ornament."

"You vixen," said McConigle and he roared with rage but Oonagh was in no way dismayed.

"He's twice your height and much better built," said she.

"You don't know my strength," said McConigle.

"In that case would you turn the house?" said Oonagh.

The giant stood up, put his middle finger in his mouth, thought for an instant, then went out, put his arms around the house, picked it up, and put it facing a different way. Finn in his cradle was now facing in a different direction and there was sweat pouring out of him with heat and nerves.

"You're a handy giant," said Oonagh and then told him that she was short of water, but that there was a fine spring under some rocks and that if he could split the rocks she'd be most obliged. He took his axe out from under his leather apron, struck at the rocks and tore a cleft that was hundreds of metres deep. Oonagh began to have doubts.

"Come in and eat," said she and added that although her husband would make mince of him, the laws of hospitality must be observed.

She placed before him six cakes of the bread and a mound of newly churned butter and she sat down pretending to be polite. He put one of the cakes in his mouth, took a bite and let out the most terrible growl.

"What kind of bread is this?" he said fiercely.

"Fresh bread," said Oonagh, cool as a breeze.

"And here are two teeth of mine gone," said he as he hauled out two big molars that were grey in colour and shaped like drinking horns.

"Why," said Oonagh, "that's Finn's bread, the only bread that he eats, him and the child there." At that she offered another cake. As soon as he put it in his mouth another great crack was heard and he let out a yell far fiercer than the first, so that the baby mewled. "Thunder and giblets," said he as he pulled out two more teeth with bits of gum on them.

"Well, Mr. McConigle," said Oonagh, "if you can't manage the bread, don't bother with it but don't be disturbing my child."

"Mammy, mammy, can I have some bread?" said the baby from the cradle and its voice gave McConigle a start. Oonagh very cleverly handed a cake that

had no griddle in and McConigle was flabbergasted as he watched the child gobble it up.

"I'd like to take a glimpse at that lad in the cradle," said he.

"Certainly," said Oonagh and she told the little baby to get up and prove himself the worthy child of his father. Now the baby stood up, looked at McConigle and said "Are you as strong as me?"

"Thundering giblets," said McConigle, "how dare you insult me."

"Can you squeeze water out of a stone?" said the child, and he put a stone into McConigle's hand. McConigle squeezed and squeezed but not a drop of liquid came out.

"Watch me," said the child and he put his hands under the covers, took out one of the white curds that looked exactly like a stone and squeezed until the liquid came out in a little shower from his hands.

"My daddy is training me," said he, "but I have a lot to learn yet."

McConigle was speechless.

"I'll go back to sleep now," said the child, "but I'd hate to waste my time on anyone that hasn't my daddy's strength, that can't eat daddy's bread or squeeze water out of a stone." Then he slipped down and as Oonagh was pulling the covers up over him he raised his index finger and gave a word of warning to McConigle. "I'd be off out of here if I were you as it's in flummery my father will have you."

"What he says is a fact," said Oonagh as she tucked Finn into the cradle and patted him to let him know how proud she was.

"I'm thinking it is," said McConigle.

"You're not in his league at all," said Oonagh and went on to remind McConigle that if the child was that strong he could only guess at the immensity of the father.

"Will you let me feel the teeth of that infant?" said he still in a quandary.

"By all means," said Oonagh and she took his hand and she stuck it straight into Finn's mouth explaining that the child's best teeth were in the back of his head. McConigle was amazed to find a baby with a full set of grinders and more amazed when he felt something snap and then felt his finger detach itself and when he pulled out his hand there was a big wound where his finger of knowledge had been. Finn had eaten it. So shocked was he and so horror-stricken that he fell down. Finn rose from the cradle and laid roundly on the monster with his bare hands. He could easily have killed him with his sword but that McConigle begged for his life and Finn being a chivalrous hero gave it to him. After that McConigle made his peace, picked up his teeth and his accoutrements, and promised to go home to Scotland and never set foot in Ireland again.