

Giants

There are many stories about giants in Cornwall. Some like Trebiggan were said to live in a cave and roast children alive on a flat rock outside his cave and eat them. And some pulled ships in from the sea. One called Holiburn was kind, but he didn't realise how strong he was. Holiburn had a small human friend and he tapped him on the head once to say hello and the man dropped down dead. Holiburn's little tap was like a thump on the head with a wooden beam to a human. Here's a Cornish story about a giant and a boy called Jack.

The White Rock

Retold by Rosanne Hawke

Far away in Cornwall there is a mountain in the sea called St Michael's Mount. If you go there when the tide is out, make sure you leave in time or else the sea rushes in and catches you unawares. But the Mount wasn't always like it is now. This is how it all started.

Long, long ago in Kernow (Cornwall) there was a boy called Jack. He lived in a village named Marazion and he looked after his father's cows and sheep during the day, taking them into the forest to eat grass. In those days there were thick woods growing over the land even in areas that are now covered by the sea. If ever a wolf came close to his father's sheep, Jack picked up stones and pelted the animal until it ran away.

Near the village there also lived two giants, Cormoran and his wife, Cormelian. Cormoran was very strong, but he made his wife do all the work. He decided to build a mountain so they would always be safe and be able to keep watch on the countryside. Cormoran carefully chose rocks from the neighbouring hills and Cormelian carried them in her apron, piling them one on the other until there grew a mountain of white rock rising above the forest of beech trees.

Now Cormelian was becoming very tired from her hard work and one day when Cormoran was asleep she decided to pull up a closer rock instead. There was a problem though for it was green. With it still in her apron she hurried to the White Rock to place it without Cormoran noticing when suddenly, he woke up.

'What are you doing?' he shouted. It was a fearsome noise; even folk miles away heard him. 'I said only white ones,' and he followed her and gave her such a kick that she dropped the green stone and it's still there to this day. Poor Cormelian didn't survive this attack from her husband, and no one knows if he was sorry about it or not. He went to live on the White Rock by himself and for food he stole the villagers' cows and sheep.

Now Jack knew how to keep cows and sheep safe from wolves, but a hungry giant was a different matter. Soon the whole village had barely a few cows and sheep left. Sometimes Cormoran even took two at once, one under each arm. The villagers knew they would starve in the winter if something wasn't done. They held a meeting and collected all the coins they could and offered them to the bravest man in Kernow who would kill the giant.

From all over Kernow only one person volunteered. He wasn't big, or a lord, or a wrestler. He wasn't a man who could shoot arrows or knock a giant down. It was Jack. His mother cried when she saw him stand forward. 'Please, don't go, Jack. He's a horrible giant. He has no conscience – ye'll be killed.' But Jack had a plan.

That night he put on his dark tunic and boots. On his back he took a sack. In it was his father's shovel and pickaxe, his father's sword and his grandfather's horn. Then Jack walked the quarter mile to White Rock, climbed up halfway until he found a spot where the rocks had dirt between them, and dug and dug and dug. Every so often he stopped and listened to make sure the giant hadn't woken up but the night was still. Finally, he had dug a pit so deep it was like a well and it took him half an hour to climb out. He laid branches over it. Then he hid himself and waited.

Just as the sun began to rise, Jack took out the sword and the horn. He raised the horn to his lips and blew. Cormoran woke up with a start. 'Who's that on my rock,' he roared.

'It's me. Jack.' And Jack stood on the other side of the pit, dancing and waving the sword. It was all too much for Cormoran so early in the morning. With a howl of rage, he picked up his club. As thick as a tree trunk it was, and he thundered down towards Jack. He would kill this puny little human. How dare he dance and make insults on his White Rock. But the giant didn't reach Jack. As he came closer, Jack retreated until suddenly the giant stepped on the branches covering the pit. He fell straight through until only his head was showing. Jack lifted the sword and sliced off Cormoran's head.

That day there was a feast and dancing in the streets of the village of Marazion. The mayor gave Jack a bag of gold and the bard made up a song on the spot:

*Here's the valiant Cornishman,
who slew the Giant Cormoran.*

The people named Jack, 'Jack the Giant-Killer.'

Even today you can see the well into which the giant fell, halfway up St Michael's Mount. If you go there, be careful not to fall in.



St Michael's Mount, Cornwall