

## **The Legend of Knockmany**

As retold by David K. McDonnell ([www.clandonnell.net](http://www.clandonnell.net))

What Irish man, woman or child has not heard of the great and glorious Finn McCool? Not one, I am certain.

Well, Finn McCool and his men were working on the Giant's Causeway. Modern scientists claim that the causeway in County Antrim was created by an ancient volcanic eruption. What these scientists say is that the eruption formed a huge lava plateau. As the lava cooled, the plateau cracked and left large pillar-like columns.

But we all know that scientists don't know anything. The causeway was not caused by a volcano at all! It was built by Finn McCool and his men. It is all that is left today of a bridge Finn was building across the North Channel to connect Ireland and Scotland.

This was obviously a big project, and Finn was forced to spend a great deal of time away from his lovely wife Oonagh. He decided to take a break from his work and go home to see how his woman got along in his absence.

Finn cut down a tree, lopped off its roots and branches, and used the remainder of the tree as a walking stick. You see, Finn was a giant of a man and needed a tree for his walking stick. And off he went to see Oonagh.

There was another giant in the region, by the name of Benadonner. Some say he was from Scotland, and other say he was from Ireland. But it is of no matter, since he was by all accounts the strongest man alive. No other man stood any chance at all in a fight with Benadonner.

Neither could nature stand up to him. One time the gods sent a thunderbolt down to the earth in the direction of Benadonner. Benadonner saw it coming and clenched his fist. He smacked that thunderbolt as hard as he could, and flattened it into a pancake. He kept that pancake in his pocket thereafter. He pulled it out of his pocket from time to time, especially to scare his enemies.

Benadonner gave all the great fighters in Ireland and Scotland a thorough beating. I should say, all the great fighters with the exception of Finn McCool. Benadonner swore that he would not rest, either day or night, summer or winter, until he found Finn McCool and gave Finn such a beating. After he had bested Finn McCool in a fight, no one could ever doubt that Benadonner was the best fighter in the entire Celtic world.

Finn McCool heard rumors that Benadonner was coming to the causeway looking for a fight. And that is why Finn had the sudden affection for his wife, and why he made the walking stick, and why he set out for his home on Knockmany.

Oonagh and Finn lived at the time at the very top of Knockmany hill, in what is now County Tyrone. Many people had wondered why Finn built his home on the top of this hill. The place

was never without a strong breeze from the sea and thus was always cold. And there wasn't even water on the hill.

But Finn would always tell them: *"It has the best view in all of Ulster and I can see for miles in any direction. And as for water, I started a well and I intend to finish it as soon as the causeway bridge is complete."*

Truth be told, Finn had another reason for building his home on the top of Knockmany. He did not want the clear view in all directions to view the beautiful surroundings. He wanted to keep a sharp lookout for Benadonner. There was indeed no better place for a man to look from and to see an enemy coming his way.

Finn spent several days in bliss with his wife Oonagh. He was comfortable indeed, considering the dread he held for Benadonner. But Oonagh could sense, as only a wife could, that something was troubling him. She needled and prodded him until he finally confessed.

*"It is Benadonner that's troubling me,"* he said. *"He's coming here to challenge me and I fear that I cannot best him. He flattened a thunderbolt into a pancake, don't you know. How am I to beat a man such as him?"*

Finn put his thumb in his mouth, which he always did when he wanted to prophesize the future. *"He's coming, I know for certain. And how I will manage, I do not know. If I run away I will be disgraced. And if I fight him, I will surely lose."*

*"When will he be here?"* Oonagh asked.

*"Tomorrow by mid-day. My thumb tells me so,"* said Finn. It was a curious thing, Finn's thumb. Whenever the thumb was pressed against a back tooth, Finn would gain much wisdom. Perhaps this is why, even today, this tooth is called a "wisdom tooth".

*"Well do not fret my dear. Depend on me. I will bring you out of this scrape better than you could bring yourself, by your rule of thumb or otherwise,"* said Oonagh.

This relieved Finn, for he did have a great deal of confidence in his wife. Oonagh grabbed a needle and thread, together with Finn's night shirt and some extra fabric. Finn's night shirt was long enough to extend to his knees, but she quickly sewed on some of the extra fabric so that it would extend down to his feet. She then added two feet to the bottom of the night shirt, and a hood to the top. It now looked like a sleeper for a baby, except that it was large enough to fit a fully-grown Finn McCool!

Oonagh then kneaded enough dough to make two loaves of bread. She used one moistened loaf to completely surround an iron griddle. She then placed both loaves – the one which encased an iron griddle and the one which did not – into the oven to bake in the usual way.

She pulled out a pot of new milk, which she made into curds and whey. And I am certain you all know, from Little Miss Muffet, that curds are coagulated milk which looks solid like a white stone, and whey is the liquid substance in and around the curds.

Having done all this, Oonagh sat down quite contented, for she knew that she, unlike her husband, could handle Benadonner when he arrived.

Sure enough, Benadonner could be seen approaching Knockmany the next day, around mid-day. Oonagh saw him and gave him a loud whistle. This was the way for the Irish, long ago, to signal travelers and let them know that they were welcome.

This confused Finn more than a wee bit: *“What are you up to, Oonagh? I am shaking like a rabbit and you are inviting my foe to my home.”*

*“Don’t you fret, Finn”, Oonagh said. “Leave Benadonner to me and do as I tell you.”*

Oonagh pulled out the cradle which she had used for their young ones, when they were small enough to fit in it. She told Finn to put on the baby sleeper, which she had made the night before, and to lie down in the cradle.

Finn did lie down in the cradle and it was indeed a tight fit. His bottom covered the entire cradle, and his head and shoulders ran up the entire side. His legs would not fit within the cradle at all, and instead dangled over the sides all the way to the floor.

*“You must pass for your own child,”* said she, *“so just lie there snug and say nothing, but be guided by me.”*

As expected, Benadonner made it up to the top of Knockmany at midday. When he reached the front door, he asked: *“Is this where the great Finn McCool lives?”*

*“Indeed it is,”* replied Oonagh, *“and won’t you come into our house?”*

*“Thank you,”* says he, *“and you must be Mrs. McCool”.*

*“That I am,”* she said, *“and what business do you have with my husband?”*

*“I have heard said that he is the strongest and bravest man in Ireland. But I am here to test that notion. Is he at home?”*

*“No he is not,”* she said. *“Someone told him that a giant of a man named Benadonner has been around the causeway looking for him, so he set out there to meet him. Truth is, for the poor giant’s sake, I hope they don’t find each other. For if Finn finds that giant, Finn will squish him into a pancake.”*

*“Well, well. I am Benadonner, and it is I who has been seeking Finn McCool.”*

Oonagh laughed a hearty laugh. *“If you take my advice, you would pray that you never meet him. But, if you must, then you are welcome to wait for him here.”*

*“In the meantime,”* she added, *“the wind is grown quite strong, coming in from the west. Whenever it does so, Finn moves the house so that it faces to the east. Since Finn is not here, would you be so kind as to turn the house so that it faces the other way.”*

Benadonner was startled by this request, but being a guest in the house he thought he should comply. He went outside of the house, put his arms around the house, and turned it as she wished. This was, as you might imagine, a difficult feat even for Benadonner. He wondered how Finn McCool could move this house whenever the wind changed directions.

Finn saw this, and began to sweat in fear. But Oonagh felt not a bit daunted.

*“Thank you so much,”* she said. *“You are such a kind man, I sure hope you do not meet my husband for he would surely do you much harm.”*

*“But while you are doing me such a favor,”* she added, *“could you do me but one more? You see we have had a long dry spell here at Knockmany and are in dire need of water. Finn says there is a fine spring-well yonder, and it was his intention to find it. But when he heard you were near, he left this place in such a hurry that he did not find the well. If you would find it, I would feel it a kindness.”*

Oonagh took Benadonner out to see the place, which was then one solid rock. Benadonner looked at it a few moments, then stopped down and picked up the rock. And then another, and yet another, until he tore out a hole about 400 feet deep and a quarter of a mile wide. And of course, at the bottom, was clear, fresh water!

This too was quite a feat and it took every ounce of Benadonner’s strength and endurance. He wondered how Finn McCool could have contemplated such a task, unless Finn was at least as strong.

*“You must come in my house now,”* said Oonagh. *“Even though you are a sworn enemy of my husband, you have done me two great favors. I must invite you to share bread with me.”*

Benadonner came into the house and sat down at the table. Oonagh handed him a loaf of bread, which was, as one might expect, the loaf baked around the iron skillet. She also handed him some butter, a side of boiled bacon, and a stack of cabbage.

Benadonner put the bread in his mouth and bit down upon it. He screamed: *“What is this? Here are two of my teeth which came out with one bite of bread!”*

*“Oh, that is Finn’s bread. It is the only bread he eats when he is home. Indeed, I forgot to tell you that nobody can eat it but himself, and that child in the cradle. I thought, though, as you are a giant as well, that you might be able to manage it. I did not want to offend a man who thinks he is able to fight Finn McCool.”*

Benadonner thought for a moment, and then decided he would take another bite. After the bite, he yelled twice as loud as he did after his first bite. *“Thunder, I have lost another tooth. If I should eat this entire cake, I would not have a tooth in my head!”*

*“If you are not able to eat the bread, you should have said so quietly,”* scolded Oonagh. *“For you noise, my child has awoken in the cradle.”*

Finn stirred in the cradle and said: *“Mother, I am hungry.”*

Oonagh gave Finn a loaf of bread, which as you may surmise, had no iron griddle in it. Finn quickly ate the entire loaf.

This startled Benadonner more than a wee bit, and he thought to himself: *“I have no chance with a man who could eat bread like this, and even his son can munch on such a loaf.”*

*“Let me take a closer look at this lad,”* said Benadonner as he walked closer to the cradle.

*“Get up,”* said Oonagh to Finn, *“and show the man your strength.”*

Finn got out of the cradle, standing tall in his childish nightgown. *“Are you strong?”* he asked of Benadonner. *“Can you squeeze water out of a stone?”*

Finn handed Benadonner a white stone. Benadonner squeezed the stone as hard as he could do, but in vain. It produced no water.

Finn then took the white stone, but with a quick slight-of-hand, exchanged it for the curds. Finn squeezed the curds until the whey, as clear as water, oozed out of his hands.

*“I’ll be going back to my cradle now,”* said Finn. *“You had better be off. If my father catches you here, he will flatten you within minutes.”*

Seeing what he had seen, Benadonner was of the same opinion. He said to Oonagh: *“I admit that, strong as I am, I am no match for Finn McCool. Tell him I will avoid him the best I can and will never return to the causeway.”*

With that said, Benadonner departed and history records that he never did return to the causeway or confront Finn McCool.

Thus did Finn McCool, through the wit and scheming of his wife Oonagh, succeed in overcoming his enemy by cunning, which he never could have done by force.