

Saint Agnes and the giant of Cornwall

(a local legend from a village in Cornwall)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you may know, the south-west corner of Great Britain is called Cornwall. It is one of the regions of Britain where the original Celtic inhabitants of the island still live, and some of them still speak a Celtic language called Cornish. They also preserve many legends that go back to Celtic mythology, especially legends about giants.

One such giant is still celebrated in a village on the coast of Cornwall. People like to point out his head, turned to stone, up on one of the local cliffs. The village celebrates his death every summer. They take out a figure made of straw and cloth, that represents the giant, and they walk him through the village and up to the cliff, where he dies again.

The story of how the giant died is rather unusual. He was tricked – that in itself is nothing unusual, because giants are known to be stupid creatures, so they are easy to trick if you are a brave and clever human. But this giant was tricked by a girl.

You see, every night the giant used to go about the whole district, pillaging and plundering, the way giants do, until he came across this young woman named Agnes. He promptly fell in love with Agnes, and wanted her to marry him. But Agnes was a Christian and a virgin, and besides, she was a saint, so she certainly didn't want to marry the giant. So she turned him down.

But the giant didn't give up so easily. He kept on pestering her and sending her presents. Apparently, he would send her dead animals – he would go around the district and pillage and plunder and kill sheep and goats and things, and then he would carry the dead sheep and goats to Saint Agnes and dump them outside her cottage and threaten to marry her whether she wanted to or not.

Perhaps that wasn't the best way of persuading a girl to marry you. Anyway, he was making a real nuisance of himself in the whole neighbourhood, and Saint Agnes decided that she really had to stop him.

So she arranged to meet him beside a deep pit. And she told the giant that if he would fill the pit with his blood, then she would marry him. And the giant, being stupid like all giants, promptly cut his wrists and let his blood drain down into the pit. After a while, of course, he bled to death.

The villagers were saved, Saint Agnes could continue being a saint and a virgin, and the giant's body turned to stone. It can still be seen there, up on the mountain above the village if you go and visit Cornwall.

Thank you.

(450 words)