

The Lonely Giant

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Far away and long ago within the green forests of Narden, there strode a mighty warrior giant. But to say that he strode within the forest is to reduce to mere man's credibility his truly giant size, for Giant Odyn was the largest giant who ever lived in those lost days when giants ranged the world. His arms were massive as ancient oaks, and wielded a hero's sword, forged in the fires of earth itself while it yet was young. His voice was the bang of thunder, and with it he could quell a rampaging army. His huge chest was like a princely palace, which held within a heart of generous gold, for he gave of his treasures to all men; and his legs were like the tallest broad-girthed Redwoods, which carried him far above the topmost trees, where he could talk with the birds as they flew, and see to the edges of the world.

From afar he saw her, and looked down from dizzy height: he loved her gentle beauty and her smile as she walked by. Her name was Verna, and she stood by the door of her father's house, watching the lofty Eagle circling high, like a flickering speck, hardly discernible to her gaze against the bright blue sky, and she would dream.

Within the forest there was nothing Giant Odyn held in fear: before the earthquake of his footfall, all evil creatures fled; his just and monumental sword cut through terrors in the night like a fierce arc; his powerful eyes could penetrate the rocky crusts within the earth and find their hidden riches; while his simple stride could out-distance fleeting phantoms as they whipped by on the wind. It was said by the men of earth that the warmth of his heart would melt the snows off the mountains, and ripen the corn as he passed.

Indeed, seeing his awesome and impressive state, none could ever guess that Giant Odyn lacked anything: for there was nothing he could not reach, and no place he could not stride, and no remotest being that did not hear his mighty voice when he called. The harshest of ogres was not unswayed by Giant Odyn's gentle heart, and might find within himself some hidden pity by the example of his benevolence; only the haughty Eagle, Oathomlig, held him in contempt, and stayed unmoved by all the giant did, for his eyrie was beyond all reach.

But deep inside, the giant was so unhappy: for all around he saw the earth prosper as the seasons came and departed; and the people of earth moved in joyful plenty, and coupled and familial and lived together in contented harmony; and Giant Odyn saw all this - and knew only loneliness. For him, there was no-one to talk with at the day's end, to hear his pleasures or his pains; no-one to share the genius of his prowess; and no-one to tell him just how valuable he was, and show him sweetest open love; and the girl whom he loved appeared indifferent to his presence and unmoved by his strength in the world. Men and women of earth could hardly see above his toes to his knees; his ears and mind were inaccessible to their tiny frames and hearts. Finally, one night, he lay upon the dark earth and wept, from the wells of his loneliness and bitter sadness.

Then Oathomlig the Eagle heard his cries and circled high above him, well beyond his reach, and called down to him: "Giant Odyn - what makes you sad? The whole earth is shaking with your sobs, the rivers are aflood with your briny tears, and my mountain eyrie is quaking and the mountain stones are rattling with your wails. You must stop this anguish, or the earth itself will perish."

Then Giant Odyn told him of the secret of his distress and the cause of his great misery, and how he longed to be of normal stature and woo the young girl whom he loved, and rid himself of the fearful burden of his loneliness.

The lofty Eagle circled high and stared unblinking down at him, and sought with smoothest promises to lift the giant's spirit with his own, and pledged to cure his care. The giant slept well on this, and dreamt of the girl whom he loved. Next day, he set out to follow all the disdainful Eagle directed him to do.

He went first to a steep mountain face, and found there a snake basking in the sun on the warm rocks. Then he lifted his potent sword till it touched the clouds - and swung it down with all his power, and severed the snake in two. But his sword struck the rock with such force that it pierced the side of the mountain up to its hilt, and so deeply that Giant Odyn could not pull it free even with all his might; and the more he pulled and the harder he struggled, so the strength flowed out from his arms and they shrank until he could no longer grip the shank, and his arms were the size of men's. Then he turned and went down to the plain below. Meanwhile, the lofty Eagle who had been watching all this from afar, swooped down and gathered the two halves of the snake, one half in each talon, and carried them off to his eyrie and devoured them.

Next day, Giant Odyn went to a clearing in the forest. It took him a long time to gather the materials and fix them together, for now his hands were small, and there was no strength in them, but eventually he finished and had fixed a trap by the clearing's edge. Then he sat down to wait. By and by, a weasel stumbled and snuffled along, wary of the trap, but sufficiently confident in Giant Odyn's presence to grow incautious, until it got caught in the trap just as the lofty Eagle had predicted. Giant Odyn took it carefully out and buttoned it up in his jacket, then lay down to sleep. Soon the weasel started struggling to get free, and began to gnaw at the giant's chest, and sucked at his blood until his noble heart shrank. Then the weasel slipped from beneath the loose folds of the jacket and staggered across the clearing, satiated by its gluttony and inglorious feasting. Then Oathomlig swooped again while the giant slept, and carried the helpless weasel off to its eyrie and consumed it.

The following day, Giant Odyn walked through the forest until he spied a small songthrush singing on a lofty bough. Hitherto, the birds had all greeted him as their friend, but now his yell caused the song thrush to rise in alarm and fly high above the approaching giant's great reach. Again and again Giant Odyn leapt for the bird, but each time it flew just beyond his grasp, getting more and more exhausted. And with each thrust and leap, the giant's legs shrank, pounding upon the earth so hard that a deep pit formed, until at last his legs were no longer than a single man's, and the climb from his own pit was the most difficult feat he had ever undertaken. But the poor bird could now barely stay above him and its song was completely drained, and in a moment Oathomlig the Eagle swooped upon it and carried it off and swallowed it whole.

Giant Odyn had only his huge head and voice left, as he now went in search of a large lake, and a very slow and painful search it was, with his new diminished stature moving at a man's pace. Finally, he came to the shore of a vast lake that disappeared in the distance, so he sat to rest for a while, and being thirsty, he knelt and began to drink. The level of the water went down with each huge draught, until suddenly he sucked up a small, green frog that tickled the back of his throat. With a mighty choke, the giant blew the water out again in a solid jet, which fountained high in the air, carrying the little frog aloft on its torrent; and as each puff of water gushed out, his head shrank, and the crest rose high above the trees. Just as the water fountain broke and began to cascade back to earth in an enormous shower, the lofty Eagle pounced once more and seized the little frog and carried this too to his eyrie, and ate it.

Now Odyn was of very small stature: the stature of a mortal man, and he thought, “Now I am as others are,” and he set off to captivate the girl whom he loved. As he came to her village, all the villages ran out to him and reviled him for not being one of them, but a stranger. He went up to the girl whom he loved and said: “I have watched over you and cared for you and protected you and your village, and all my giant gifts I have surrendered for my love of you.”

But Verna replied: “Once I longed for a mighty giant to rule the earth by his power and justice, and I loved all that you were. But now you have become a common man, of no use to anyone; I despise you for your lameness and your foolish mind.” And she ridiculed him, and said: “My dream is to rise beyond the earth, with its weakness and poverty of mind. My dream is to rise into the heavens; I want to be carried aloft to the summit of the world. What can you do for me?” And she mocked him and called him derisively, “Little Odyn!”

Meanwhile, Oathomlig hovered overhead, strengthened by Odyn’s gifts, and his dark shadow grew and covered the village as he came lower with every glide, till suddenly he swooped and grasped the girl and carried her away. Little Odyn could do no more than wave a small stick, and his voice was not heard above the shouts of ecstasy of the girl, and his legs could not carry him fast enough to follow, so she was lost to his sight even before he reached the edge of the village.

Then the men of the village pelted Little Odyn and drove him away, and loathed him, for he could give them nothing, and he was more lonely than ever. But from the height of the eyrie, Verna’s laughter echoed round the trees and hugged the mossy walls and entered the crypts and caverns of the night, for she had touched her dreams and cared for no-one.