

How Thor Fought the Giant Hrungner

by Emilie Kip Baker

One day Odin took a long journey into a land far beyond the seas; and as his road homeward lay through Jötunheim, he went with all speed across that dreary country. With the swiftness of the wind his wonderful horse Sleipnir carried him over the ice and snow that lay thick on the frozen ground; and sometimes, when the mountains loomed very tall in front of them, the horse rose into the air, soaring through mist and cloud as easily as some great bird.

Then as the golden hoofs of Sleipnir struck fire from the hard rocks that seemed to spring up everywhere beneath his feet, Odin rejoiced in the strength and beauty of his horse, for he knew that there was not its like in all the world. He had almost crossed the last stretch of treeless country on the edge of Jötunheim, when he saw a giant seated on a rock, with his horse standing idly beside him. As Sleipnir came rushing by, the giant called out: "Ho! stranger. Why do you ride so swiftly?"

Odin drew rein and came back to the rock where the speaker sat. The giant looked critically at Sleipnir's splendid head and arching neck; then he said, "That is a fine horse you have."

"There is no steed that can equal him in beauty or in swiftness," replied Odin, proudly. The giant scowled at these boastful words, and replied angrily:

"Not so fast, my friend. It is easier to talk than to prove the truth of one's words. Now my horse Goldfax is fully as fine as yours; and there is nothing to match him for speed in the whole land of Jötunheim."

"Jötunheim!" cried Odin, contemptuously. "What could you expect from such a country as this? Why, my steed was reared in the sunny meadows of Asgard, where he still pastures night and day."

"Well, whatever he is, there is no need for us to waste words in boasting," said the giant. "Let us run a race and prove whose horse is the better."

Odin gladly agreed to this; and when the giant mounted his horse Goldfax, the two riders set off on a gallop that made the hills reëcho to the sound of clattering hoofs. Sleipnir, overjoyed at the prospect of a race with something worth his mettle, threw back his head and sped like an arrow toward Asgard. The giant followed close behind, and so full was he of the excitement of the chase that he was unaware of being carried within his enemy's gates. Heimdall, who stood watching by the rainbow bridge, looked on in surprise as the Ruler of Asgard rushed swiftly by; and he would have sounded the usual alarm at the sight of the giant following, if Odin had not signalled to him to let the strange horse and rider go past.

When the giant, whose name was Hrungner, found himself surrounded by so many of those who were his sworn enemies, he grew fearful and began to look helplessly about him. Soon he realized, however, that the laws of hospitality assured every kindness to a guest, and he knew that he was as safe in Asgard as he would be in Jötunheim. So when Odin summoned him to the feast at Valhalla, Hrungner sat down to eat and drink with the gods, feeling at heart very proud to be in the midst of so noble a company.

As the feast progressed, and the giant drained one horn after another of the sparkling drink the gods

supplied, he began to grow boastful. He laughed at the smallness of Odin's shield-hung hall, and told of the great palaces that were built by the frost-giants. He boasted loudly of his own great strength; and as he drank more and more of the wine so freely poured, he cried: "What a puny lot of men you are to call yourselves gods! There is not a giant in Jötunheim who could not beat any one of you in single combat. If I chose to make so unfair a return for your hospitality, I could pull this poor little hall about your ears, and not leave one stone upon another in the whole of Asgard."

The gods grew very angry at these insulting words; but as Hrungner was their guest, they could not punish him as he deserved. So the giant continued drinking; and as his swaggering grew more unbearable, the gods with difficulty restrained themselves from striking him dead where he sat. "I shall drink every drop of wine in Asgard before I leave here," he cried, glaring drunkenly at Odin. "Then I shall pick up a handful of you people that are called gods, and carry you off to Jötunheim as playthings for my children."

So pleased was the giant with his own wit that he began to laugh until the cups rattled upon the table. The gods felt they could not endure his presence any longer, and determined to hurl him out of Asgard, even if he was their guest. But Loki, who was enjoying the giant's boasts and drunken wit, begged them not to act too hastily; so Hrungner kept on drinking unmolested. Suddenly he threw his cup with a crash to the ground, and, looking insolently around at the company, cried, "The gods have always been the enemies of the frost-giants; but soon I will drive them from their lofty place, and take Sif and Freya to be my servants."

This insulting speech was more than the gods could bear; so they called upon Thor to rid them of the braggart in any way he desired. Then Hrungner saw the wrathful face of the god approaching, and saw, too, the upraised hammer; but he was too full of drunken courage to feel afraid. Before Mjölner fell, he roared savagely at Thor: "If I had my shield and flint stone here, you would not dare to come at me with your wonderful hammer. It is very brave of you to strike an unprotected guest."

At these words Thor's arm dropped to his side, and the giant gave a mocking laugh.

"Let this mighty fighter meet me in single combat on the plains of Jötunheim, and then I will prove that the frost-giants are stronger than any of the timid dwellers in Asgard."

Thor was only too ready to accept the challenge, and arranged to meet the giant on a certain plain in Jötunheim. Then Hrungner, who felt that there was nothing more for him to do or say in Asgard, took his departure; and, returning to his own country, spread the news that there was to be a mighty combat between himself and Thor. The giants did not feel very certain of Hrungner's victory over the god, so they decided to help him in every possible way. They made a huge giant out of clay and stood him on the plain where the battle was to be fought, hoping by this stratagem to deceive Thor. As there was no human heart to put into the clay giant, they gave him a mare's heart, and this made the poor creature so timid that he could barely be induced to stand still on the plain and await Thor's coming.

Beside the newly made giant stood Hrungner with his shield and flintstone, secretly hoping that Thor would mistake the clay figure for that of his opponent, and so spend the first force of his blows on the mock giant's head. Suddenly on the crest of the mountain appeared a runner; and soon Thor's servant, Thialfi, came speeding toward them. He called loudly to Hrungner: "My master is on his way to meet you; but he will not follow on the road I came. He is coming along underground, and will attack you from beneath." The stupid giant believed this; so he threw his shield on the ground and stood firmly upon it, with the flintstone in his hand, ready to strike Thor's head the moment it emerged.

Soon there came a sudden roaring sound as if all the waters of the earth were rushing to pour themselves into the sea; the sky darkened, and through the thick clouds the lightning gleamed and flashed over the darkening plain. Nearer and nearer came the crashing of thunder which heralded Thor's approach, and the hills answered with long, deep peals. Then on the brow of the hill overlooking the plain appeared Thor's majestic figure, so terrible to behold that most of the giants fled away in fear. With incredible swiftness he rushed upon Hrungner, and the hammer—whirled through the air by his mighty arm—flew straight at the giant's head. The terrific force of the blow hurled Hrungner at once to the ground, but not before he had thrown his flintstone at Thor's forehead.

The noise of the combat was like the crashing of many mountains together. Hrungner fell to the ground like an oak tree that has received the last stroke of the axe; and, as he fell, Thialfi sprang at the clay giant and disposed of him with one straight blow. The flintstone which Hrungner had thrown, sank into Thor's forehead; and the sudden pain made him so dizzy that he staggered forward and fell just where Hrungner's great body lay stretched upon the ground. Then Thor found to his dismay that one of the giant's feet was resting firmly on his neck; and, try as he would, he could not get free. So he bade Thialfi bring his little Magne, who was only three days old, and when the child came, he easily lifted the great foot from his father's neck. Thor was very proud of this display of strength, and he wished to give his son the giant's horse Goldfax, but Odin would not permit the gift.

The frost-giants were discouraged over the complete defeat of their champion, but they took great satisfaction in seeing the flintstone which Hrungner had driven into Thor's forehead. When the Thunderer returned to Asgard he found that the stone caused him much pain, and there seemed to be no way to remove it. So he sent for the sorceress Groa, who, as soon as she came, began to weave her magic spells, and chant weird songs, and Thor felt the stone in his head already beginning to loosen. While Groa continued her incantations, and the pain in his head grew less and less each moment, Thor tried to think of some way in which he could reward his benefactress for her kindness. Orvandel, Groa's husband, had been for many years away from his home; and as the sorceress loved him very dearly, there was nothing she wished for so much as his return. Thor was partly responsible for her husband's disappearance, for Orvandel had once angered him so that he had put the offender into a basket and carried him to a far-off country, where he left the unfortunate man to find his way back alone. During the journey the air was so cold that poor Orvandel nearly perished in his narrow prison. As it was, one of his toes which protruded from the basket really did freeze; and this made Thor so ashamed of his harsh treatment of Orvandel that he set the prisoner free. Then he placed his toe in the sky as a star, and in the northern heavens there is a bright constellation which is still known as Orvandel's Toe.

When Thor told Groa what he had done, and promised to bring her husband back to her at once, the sorceress became so overjoyed at the prospect of Orvandel's return that she forgot all her magic arts and spells. Full of happiness at the thought of seeing her husband, she suddenly stopped her weird singing, and was unable to resume it, though Thor begged her to continue the enchantment until the stone was loosed. But Groa had lost all her mystic power, and could never charm things from their place again. So the flintstone remained in Thor's forehead, and in the far-off countries of the north, the children are taught not to throw any stone too hard upon the floor, for when it strikes the ground the flint in Thor's forehead moves, and causes the god much pain.

Source:

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