

# *Sponsken and the Giant*

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Belgian

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*Intermediate*

*26 min read*

There was once a lad whose face was so badly pitted by the smallpox that everybody called him Sponsken, which means little sponge. From the very day of his birth Sponsken had been a great cause of anxiety to his parents, and as he grew older he became more trouble still, for he was so full of whims and mischief that one never knew where one had him. He would not learn his lessons, nor work at any serious task for ten minutes on end. All he seemed to think of was cutting capers and playing practical jokes on people. At last, in despair, his parents told their trouble to the village sexton, who was a great friend of the family, and often came to smoke his pipe with Sponsken's father in the chimney corner.

"Don't worry, my friends," said the sexton. "I've seen young men like your son before, and they are quite easy to manage if one only goes about it the right way. Just leave him to me. What he wants is a good fright, and I'll make it my business to see that he gets it."

So far so good. Sponsken's parents were only too glad to fall in with any plan which seemed likely to reform their unruly son, so the sexton went off to make his arrangements. That night he whitened his face with flour, covered himself in a white sheet, and hid behind a tree on a road along which he knew Sponsken would have to pass.

It was the dark of the moon, and the place the sexton had chosen was very lonely. For a long time he waited;

then, hearing Sponsken coming along whistling a merry tune, he sprang out suddenly from behind his tree and waved his arms in a terrifying manner.

“Hallo!” said Sponsken. “Who are you?”

The sexton uttered a hollow groan.

“What’s the matter?” said the boy. “Are you ill? If you can’t speak, get out of my way, for I am in a hurry.”

The sexton groaned again, louder than before, and waved his arms wildly.

“Come, come,” cried Sponsken, “I can’t stay here all night. Tell me what you want at once and let me pass.” Then, as the ghostly figure made no answer, he struck it a blow with the stout ash-stick which he carried, and the poor sexton fell, stunned, to the ground. Sponsken stayed long enough to take a glimpse of the ghost’s face and to recognize the features of the sexton beneath the flour; then he went on his way homeward, whistling as merrily as before.

When he reached home his parents gazed at him uneasily. They were very anxious about the success of their friend’s plan, but Sponsken did not look at all like a lad who had been frightened—quite the contrary in fact, for he drew his chair up to the table and set to work upon his supper with an excellent appetite.

“A funny thing happened to me to-night,” he said carelessly between two bites of an onion. “As I was walking along the lonely road by the cemetery a white figure jumped out at me.”

“A wh-white figure!” stammered his father. “How terrifying! And what did you do, my son?”

“Do?” said Sponsken cheerfully. “Why, I fetched him a crack on the skull with my staff. He went down like a ninepin, and I warrant he won’t try to frighten travellers again!”

“Base, ungrateful boy!” cried his father, rising to his feet. “It was my dear friend Jan the sexton you struck. All I hope is that you have not killed him.”

“Well, if I have, it is his own fault,” answered Sponsken. “He should not play tricks on me.” But his father continued to rage and grumble so long that Sponsken got tired of hearing him at last, and flung off to bed in a sulk.

“I’ll stand no more of this,” he said to himself. “Since my own people do not appreciate me, I’ll go out and seek my own fortune in the world, and they may go on as best they can.”

The next morning, therefore, having packed a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese in a bag, Sponsken set off on his travels, telling nobody where he was going, and taking nothing else with him except a sparrow which he had tamed and kept since it was a fledgling. After walking for a long time he came to a forest, and feeling rather tired he sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree to rest.

Now in this forest lived a giant who was the most hideous creature one could possibly imagine. From his forehead jutted a pair of horns; his features were more like those of a beast than a man, and his finger-nails grew long and curved like the claws of a wild animal. The giant considered himself lord of the whole wood, and was very jealous lest anybody should enter his domain. When, therefore, he saw Sponsken he was very angry, and having pulled up a young tree by the roots to serve him as a club, he approached the young man, who was sitting with his eyes closed, and struck him a heavy blow on the shoulder.

In spite of appearances, Sponsken was not asleep; he was far too wary a person to be caught napping under such conditions. As a matter of fact, he had seen the giant before the giant saw him, and he knew that his only chance of escape was to remain unperturbed and calm. When, therefore, the giant struck him on the shoulder, he opened his eyes sleepily, rubbed the place, and said with a yawn: “A pest on these flies! They bite so hard that a fellow can’t sleep for them.”

“You shall sleep soundly enough in a minute!” muttered the giant, who was enraged at Sponsken’s nonchalance. “See how you like this!” And he gave the lad a blow on the other shoulder, harder than before.

“There they are again!” cried Sponsken, rubbing the place. “My word! They bite even harder on this side than on the other. It is time I was going!” And he rose from his seat, starting back with surprise as he affected to see the giant for the first time.

“So it’s you, is it?” he cried. “What do you mean by tickling me when I am trying to sleep? If I were not so kind-hearted I’d break your neck for you!”

“Have a care what you say,” cried the giant. “Do you know that I have the strength of twenty men and could crush you between my hands like a kitten?”

“Pooh!” said Sponsken. “Words are windy things. I have no doubt you could kill a whole regiment with your breath. But words won’t go with me, my man; you must give me some proof of your prowess.”

“Proof!” roared the giant. “See here! I can throw a stone so high into the air that it will not come down for a quarter of an hour.” And he was as good as his word, for, picking up a large stone, he flung it with all his strength, and it was more than a quarter of an hour before it fell again at their feet.

“Can you match that?” asked the giant with a grin.

“Easily,” said Sponsken. “I will throw a stone so high that it will not come down at all!” Bending to the ground he picked up a pebble and showed it to the giant, but very cleverly he managed at the last moment to exchange it for<sup>[27]</sup> the sparrow which he carried in his pocket, and this he was able to do because the giant was rather short-sighted, and, if truth be told, slow-witted as well.

“One, two, three!” cried Sponsken, and he tossed the bird into the air, and of course it flew up and up and never came down at all.

“Well, well,” said the giant, “I never saw such a thing as that in my life before. You are certainly a wonderful stone-thrower, little man. But can you do this?” And picking up another stone, he squeezed it so hard between his immense fists that he crushed it into a fine powder.

“Yes, that is hard to do,” said Sponsken, “but I think I can go one better. Any oaf, if he be strong enough, can crush a stone to powder, but it requires skill as well as strength to wring the juice out of one. Watch me!” So saying, Sponsken adroitly slipped out his piece of cheese, and squeezed it until the whey dripped from between his fingers.

“Marvellous!” said the giant. “I confess myself beaten. Let us go into partnership, for there cannot be two

others like us in the whole world.”

“Willingly,” answered Sponsken, “but what are we to do?”

“Why, as for that,” said the giant, “the King of this country has promised his daughter’s hand in marriage, and a great treasure besides, to anybody who can destroy three ferocious beasts which are devastating his realm. It seems to me that this is a task we can quite well do together. You, with your quickness and skill, can trap the beasts, and I can kill them with my club. That done, we will divide the spoils.”

So it was agreed, and without wasting a moment the two took the wood together. Before very long they reached the King’s palace, and sent up a message by one of the lords in waiting that they would like to see His Majesty.

“And do you mean to tell me,” asked the King, when he had heard the giant’s tale, “that you can overcome the three fierce animals by the help of this ugly little pock-marked fellow.”

“Hush! Not so loud, for the love of heaven!” whispered the giant. “My friend is very touchy about his appearance, and if he hears you making such slighting remarks it is very likely he will bring the whole of your palace down about your head!”

“You don’t say so!” whispered the King in reply, glancing fearfully at the terrible little man. “Well, you are at liberty to try your luck. The three animals are a bear, a unicorn, and a wild boar, and at present they are hidden in the wood close by. There you will find them, but take care of yourselves, for they have already killed scores of my men.”

“Don’t be afraid,” answered the giant, “for us this is as easy as playing a game.”

After having partaken of a good meal the two made their way towards the wood in which the animals were hidden.

“We must make a plan,” said Sponsken. “Listen to what I propose. You go into the middle of the wood while I remain here on the outskirts; then when you drive the beasts out I will see that they do not escape.”

So it was arranged. The giant went forward into the wood, while Sponsken remained outside, waiting to see

what would happen. He had not to wait long, for presently there was a crashing and a tearing of undergrowth and a great bear came lumbering towards him. Sponsken did not like the look of the creature at all, and decided to put as much space between them as possible. Looking here and there for a refuge, he spied a big oak-tree, and quickly climbed its trunk and ensconced himself among the branches.

Unfortunately the bear had already seen him, and, raising himself on his hind legs with a dreadful roar, he rushed to the tree and began to climb. In another moment Sponsken would have been lost, but by good chance the tree happened to be hollow, so without hesitation the lad let himself down into the trunk, and finding at the bottom a small hole which led to the open air, he was just able to wriggle through it and escape. The bear followed him into the hollow trunk, but the hole at the bottom was too small for him to get out by, and as there was hardly room to move inside the trunk, the angry creature had to stay where he was, waking all the echoes in the forest with his growling.

The next minute the giant came running out of the forest. "Have you seen the bear?" he cried. "I drove him towards you!"

"Don't worry," answered Sponsken coolly; "I've shut him up in the tree there to keep him safe."

The giant rushed to the tree and dispatched the bear with one blow of his great club. Then, pulling out the carcass, he shouldered it, and the two went back to the palace, congratulating each other on the excellent beginning of their enterprise.

There remained now the unicorn and the wild boar. Next day Sponsken and the giant went to the forest again, and since their first plan had been so successful, it was arranged that they should follow exactly the same course. The giant went into the depths of the wood to find the unicorn and drive him out, while Sponsken remained on the borders to capture the animal when he came.

This time the period of waiting was longer, and Sponsken, leaning against the oak-tree, had almost fallen asleep when a clattering of hoofs awakened him, and he sprang aside just in time to escape the unicorn, who, breathing fire from his nostrils, charged down upon him. So great was the impetus of the beast's charge that he could not stop himself, and with a mighty crash he ran full tilt into the tree, driving his horn so far into the trunk that, although he pulled and struggled, he could not wrench himself free.

When the giant came up, Sponsken showed him the animal, which was quickly killed with a single blow of the club.

"Didn't I manage that affair well?" asked Sponsken as they went back to the palace.

"You are a wonder!" answered the giant, and he really believed what he said.

Now only the wild boar remained, and on the following day the two went to the forest to capture him also. Once again the same plan was followed, but this time Sponsken kept his eyes wide open, and when the ferocious beast broke cover he ran as fast as he could in the direction of the royal chapel. The wild boar followed him, and a fearsome creature he looked, I assure you, with his wicked little eyes and his great curved tusks and the hair on his back bristling like the quills of a porcupine.

Through the open door of the chapel Sponsken ran, and the boar, snorting with fury, followed him. Then began a fine chase, round and round the aisles, over the pews, and in and out of the vestries. At last Sponsken seized a chair, and dashing it against a window broke several panes, and so made good his escape. While the boar was still standing stupidly staring at the hole through which he had gone out, Sponsken ran round to the door, which he closed and locked. Then, having broken one or two more panes of glass, he sat down quietly by the chapel wall and began to pare his nails.

A short time afterwards the giant came rushing up.

"Where is the boar? Have you let him get away?" he cried.

"Don't get so excited," answered Sponsken. "The boar is safe enough. He's in the chapel there. I had no other place to put him, so I flung him through the window!"

“What a wonderful little man you are!” said the giant gleefully, and he ran off to kill the boar with one blow of his club. This done, he hoisted the carcass on to his shoulders and took the road to the palace. Half-way there the weight of the boar began to tell, for it was a massive beast, and the giant was forced to stay and rest.

“It is all very well,” said he, mopping his streaming brow, “but I think you ought to take a turn with me in carrying this carcass.”

“Not I,” answered Sponsken. “We made an agreement that my work was done when I captured the beast, and I intend to keep to it.”

So the giant had to struggle on as best he could for the rest of the way, grumbling at every step, while Sponsken followed, laughing up his sleeve, and exceedingly thankful that he had escaped the task.

When they reached the palace the two presented themselves before the King and claimed the promised reward. But now a difficulty arose. It was quite easy to divide the treasure, but which of them was to have the Princess?

“I think it should be I,” said the giant, “for I killed the three animals.”

“Not at all,” said Sponsken. “The Princess should be given to me, for I captured the beasts.”

“A lot of good your capturing them would have been if I had not killed them!” said the giant.

“How could you have killed them if I had not caught them first?” answered Sponsken. And so the two began to quarrel, and neither would give way, and high words passed between them. Truth to tell, the King was not at all sorry that the dispute had arisen, for he did not very much relish the idea of his daughter marrying either the bestial giant or the pock-marked, ugly little fellow who was his companion.

“There is only one way out of the difficulty,” said the King at last. “We must let fate decide. Listen to the plan I propose. You shall both of you sleep in the Princess’s chamber to-night—the giant in a bed on one side of her couch, and Sponsken on the other. I also will remain in her chamber and watch her carefully. If she spends most of the night with her face turned towards Sponsken, it shall be a sign that she is to marry him; if, on the other hand, she favours the giant, he shall be her husband; but if she sleeps all night with her face towards neither of you, then you must both give her up, and be satisfied with the treasure.”

So it was agreed, and that night the trial took place. Sponsken, however, did not by any means intend that blind chance should settle so important a matter, and he spent the intervening time in making certain preparations. First of all he went to the palace gardens, from which he gathered certain herbs having an aromatic and beautiful perfume; these he placed in a bag and hid under his clothes. Then from the woods he gathered all the herbs he could find which had a disagreeable smell, such as garlic and stinkwort and poisonous fungus; these also he placed in a bag, and seized an early opportunity, when they came to the Princess’s chamber, of hiding the bag under the pillow on which the giant’s head was to rest.

The Princess well knew the fateful issue which was to be decided in the night, and as she had firmly made up her mind not to marry either the one or the other of her suitors, she determined to remain awake all night and to take care to keep her face turned towards the ceiling. For a time she managed to do so, but before long drowsiness overcame her, and she slept. Presently she turned over on her left side and lay with her face turned towards the giant, who began to chuckle to himself.

“Wait a minute,” thought Sponsken. “I don’t think the<sup>[35]</sup> Princess will keep that position long!” And sure enough, the horrible stench of the herbs in the bag beneath the giant’s pillow penetrated even to her dreams, and the Princess turned over hurriedly on the other side. What a change was there! Instead of a disgusting smell which made her dream of gloomy caverns and noisome things, she found now a delicious perfume that brought pictures of sunlit gardens all glowing with flowers and bright-winged butterflies flitting over them. The Princess gave a little sigh of content, and for the rest of the night she remained with her face turned towards Sponsken, so that the King had no choice but to declare the little man the winner.

The Princess, however, refused to abide by the judgment. "I will *not* marry that vulgar fellow," she cried. "I will die first! Oh, father, if you love me, think of a means of escape!"

"Do not be afraid, my child," answered the King. "I will arrange something." And the next day he took the giant aside and proposed to him that he should rid him of Sponsken, promising a rich reward for the service. The giant's greed was aroused, and being very jealous of his companion's success, he was the more ready to fall in with the King's suggestion.

Fortunately for himself, Sponsken's quick wits made him suspicious. He guessed that some treachery was afoot, and in order to be prepared for emergencies he took a heavy hammer with him when he retired to bed at night. His suspicions were justified, for towards midnight the door of his room opened and the giant entered on tiptoe, carrying a heavy axe with which he intended to dispatch our friend. No sooner was his foot inside the door, however, than Sponsken jumped out of bed and sprang at him, looking so fierce that the giant, who was a coward at heart, and had besides a healthy respect for his companion's powers, turned and fled in dismay. Then Sponsken lifted his heavy hammer and struck three resounding blows upon the floor. The noise awoke everybody in the palace, and servants, guards, and lords in waiting came flocking to the room to discover the cause. The King came last of all, a little anxious about the success of his fine plot, and when he found Sponsken sitting up in bed, quite unharmed, his face fell.

"What is the matter?" he stammered.

"Matter?" answered Sponsken. "Nothing very much! Some person wandered into my room, so I just gave three taps with my fingers on the wall. It is lucky for you all that I did not strike the blows with my fist, for had I done so I am afraid there would have been nothing left of your palace but a heap of dust!"

At these words everybody turned pale, and the King made haste to protest his undying friendship for his terrible guest.

As for the giant, he was in such fear of encountering Sponsken's resentment that he fled, and nobody ever saw him again.

Now the poor King did not know what to do, for his daughter still persisted in her refusal to marry Sponsken,

and he was torn two ways by love and fear. Just at that time, however, a neighbouring monarch, who was an old enemy of the King's, declared war upon him, and this offered another opportunity for delay. Calling Sponsken before him, the King proposed that he should prove his valour by challenging the enemy king to mortal combat. Sponsken agreed; but his fame had already been noised abroad, and the challenge was refused.

“Very well,” said the King, who was at the end of his resources. “As my prospective son-in-law you ought to lead my armies into battle. I will place my own charger at your disposal, and I look to you to save my country from defeat.”

Here was a pretty kettle of fish! Sponsken had never ridden a horse in his life, and he had not the slightest knowledge of warfare. To make matters worse, the steed in question was a notoriously vicious brute who would allow nobody but his own master to mount him. Already he had accounted for several grooms and stablemen, whom he had kicked to death.

Sponsken commanded that the steed should be led to the borders of the forest and tied by the bridle to a tree. He had not the slightest intention of trying to mount the brute, and his plan was to wait until the attendants had gone away and then to slip off unobserved. Fate, however, was too much for him, for hardly was the horse safely tied up than couriers came spurring along the road to say that the enemy king was advancing at the head of his army, and was at that very moment less than half a mile away.

All the attendants fled at once, and Sponsken himself was so overcome by terror that, without thinking what he was doing, he jumped upon the back of the steed, and, forgetting that it was tied to the tree, dug his sharp spurs into its side. The horse plunged and reared, champing at the bit and doing its best to dislodge Sponsken from the saddle, but the lad clung on for dear life. At last, finding all its efforts unavailing, the horse dragged the tree up by the roots and charged forward in a straight line towards the advancing enemy. Almost dislodged from his seat by the sudden jerk, Sponsken stretched out his hand and grasped the branches of the tree, which swung in a terrifying manner at his side, promising every moment to hurl him from the saddle, and the result was that to the enemy army it appeared as though he were charging down upon them at full speed, bearing a tree as a club. Filled with dismay at the terrifying sight, the soldiers of the enemy king fled in all directions and hid themselves in the woods and in the crevices of the rocks. Sponsken rode on for the simple reason that he could do nothing else, right into the enemy's camp, where the steed came to a standstill and our hero was able

to jump down from its back. Entering the king's tent, he helped himself to all the documents and articles of value he could find; then, having cut the tree from the bridle, he remounted the horse, which was now quite tame and docile, and rode back to the palace.

When the King heard that the enemy was routed he was overjoyed, and he recognized that a man who could perform such a feat single-handed was not to be treated lightly. His daughter, however, was still firm in her refusal to marry Sponsken, and so the King made him an offer of half his kingdom if he would release him from his promise and allow the Princess to go free. Sponsken accepted his terms and married a girl who, although she was not a princess, was nevertheless very pretty. Their wedding was celebrated with great pomp and they lived together very happily for the rest of their lives.

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