

The Story of a Clever Tailor

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

German

Intermediate

7 min read

Once upon a time there lived an exceedingly proud Princess. If any suitor for her hand ventured to present himself, she would give him some riddle or conundrum to guess, and if he failed to do so, he was hunted out of the town with scorn and derision. She gave out publicly that all comers were welcome to try their skill, and that whoever could solve her riddle should be her husband.

Now it happened that three tailors had met together, and the two elder thought, that after having successfully put in so many fine and strong stitches with never a wrong one amongst them, they were certain to do the right thing here too. The third tailor was a lazy young scamp who did not even know his own trade properly, but who thought that surely luck would stand by him now, just for once, for, if not, what was to become of him?

The two others said to him, 'You just stay at home, you'll never get on much with your small allowance of brains.' But the little tailor was not to be daunted, and said he had set his mind on it and meant to shift for himself, so off he started as though the whole world belonged to him.

The three tailors arrived at Court, where they had themselves duly presented to the Princess, and begged she would propound her riddles, 'for,' said they, 'here were the right men at last, with wits so sharp and so fine you might almost thread a needle with them.'

Then said the Princess, 'I have on my head two different kinds of hair. Of what colours are they?'

'If that's all,' said the first tailor, 'they are most likely black and white, like the kind of cloth we call pepper-and-salt.'

'Wrong,' said the Princess.

'Then,' said the second tailor, 'if they are not black and white, no doubt they are red and brown, like my father's Sunday coat.'

'Wrong again,' said the Princess; 'now let the third speak. I see he thinks he knows all about it.'

Then the young tailor stepped boldly to the front and said, 'The Princess has one silver and one golden hair on her head, and those are the two colours.'

When the Princess heard this she turned quite pale, and almost fainted away with fear, for the little tailor had hit the mark, and she had firmly believed that not a soul could guess it. When she had recovered herself she said, 'Don't fancy you have won me yet, there is something else you must do first. Below in the stable is a bear with whom you must spend the night, and if when I get up in the morning I find you still alive you shall marry me.'

She quite expected to rid herself of the tailor in this way, for the bear had never left anyone alive who had once come within reach of his claws. The tailor, however, had no notion of being scared, but said cheerily, 'Bravely dared is half won.'

When evening came on he was taken to the stable. The bear tried to get at him at once and to give him a warm welcome with his great paws. 'Gently, gently,' said the tailor, 'I'll soon teach you to be quiet,' and he coolly drew a handful of walnuts from his pocket and began cracking and eating them as though he had not a care or anxiety in the world. When the bear saw this he began to long for some nuts himself. The tailor dived into his pocket and gave him a handful, but they were pebbles, not nuts. The bear thrust them into his mouth, but try as he might he could not manage to crack them. 'Dear me,' thought he, 'what a stupid fool I must be—can't even crack a nut,' and he said to the tailor, 'I say, crack my nuts for me, will you?'

'You're a nice sort of fellow,' said the tailor; 'the idea of having those great jaws and not being able even to crack a walnut!' So he took the stone, quickly changed it for a nut, and crack! it split open in a moment.

'Let me try again,' said the bear; 'when I see the thing done it looks so easy I fancy I must be able to manage it

myself.'

So the tailor gave him some more pebbles, and the bear bit and gnawed away as hard as he could, but I need hardly say that he did not succeed in cracking one of them.

Presently the tailor took out a little fiddle and began playing on it. When the bear heard the music he could not help dancing, and after he had danced some time he was so pleased that he said to the tailor, 'I say, is fiddling difficult?' 'Mere child's play,' replied the tailor; 'look here! you press the strings with the fingers of the left hand, and with the right, you draw the bow across them, so—then it goes as easily as possible, up and down, tra la la la la—'

'Oh,' cried the bear, 'I do wish I could play like that, then I could dance whenever the fancy took me. What do you think? Would you give me some lessons?'

'With all my heart,' said the tailor, 'if you are sharp about it. But just let me look at your paws. Dear me, your nails are terribly long; I must really cut them first.' Then he fetched a pair of stocks, and the bear laid his paws on them, and the tailor screwed them up tight. 'Now just wait whilst I fetch my scissors,' said he, and left the bear growling away to his heart's content, whilst he lay down in a corner and fell fast asleep.

When the Princess heard the bear growling so loud that night, she made sure he was roaring with delight as he worried the tailor.

Next morning she rose feeling quite cheerful and free from care, but when she looked across towards the stables, there stood the tailor in front of the door looking as fresh and lively as a fish in the water.

After this it was impossible to break the promise she had made so publicly, so the King ordered out the state coach to take her and the tailor to church to be married.

As they were starting, the two bad-hearted other tailors, who were envious of the younger one's happiness, went to the stable and unscrewed the bear. Off he tore after the carriage, foaming with rage. The Princess heard his puffing and roaring, and growing frightened she cried: 'Oh dear! the bear is after us and will certainly catch us up!' The tailor remained quite unmoved. He quietly stood on his head, stuck his legs out at the carriage window and called out to the bear, 'Do you see my stocks? If you don't go home this minute I'll screw you tight into them.'

When the bear saw and heard this he turned right round and ran off as fast as his legs would carry him. The

tailor drove on unmolested to church, where he and the Princess were married, and he lived with her many years as happy and merry as a lark. Whoever does not believe this story must pay a dollar.

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