

About the Resourceful Little Tailor

Once upon a time there lived in this world a proud princess. And she made it known to all that whoever came to her need only guess her riddle, and he would become her husband.

So three tailors turned up and resolved to answer that call. The two elder ones, more skilled, held a high opinion of themselves, and it already seemed to them that in this matter they would not miss; the third, however, was far from a master in his craft, yet he believed in his own luck and fortune...

The two elders tried to dissuade him: "You'd better stay at home; how could you with your little wit take on such a task?" But the little tailor would not be put off; he knew that the head on his shoulders was not there for nothing, and that somehow he would manage to extricate himself from the affair...

So all three of them appeared before the princess and asked her to give them a riddle: thereby they let it be understood that they were no ordinary folk, but people of understanding, against whom not even a mosquito could sharpen its nose.

Then the princess said to them: "On my head I have hair of two colors—what two colors are they?" "Well, if that is the only question," said the elder tailor, "then your hair is mixed black and white, just like the cloth we call dark with a sparkle." "You have guessed incorrectly," said the princess; "the second one's turn."

The second tailor answered: "If your hair is not black and white, then surely it is light brown and red—my father still has a coat of that very color." "You have guessed incorrectly," said the princess; "you answer, the third. By your face I see that you will guess." The little tailor boldly stepped forward and said: "The princess has on her head hair of gold and silver—that is why she calls it two-colored." As soon as the princess heard this, she turned pale and nearly fainted from fright, for the little tailor had guessed correctly.

Having recovered a little from her fright, she said: "Though you have guessed my riddle, I will not marry you until you do this besides: down in the stable I have a bear—with him you must spend a whole night; if tomorrow I find you alive, then I will marry you." By this she thought to rid herself of the little tailor, for the bear had never yet let anyone go from his claws alive. But the little tailor would not be frightened and answered her cheerfully: "He who has decided has already done half the deed!"

When evening came, the little tailor was led down into the stall to the bear. The bear was about to pounce on him at once and seize him in his claws... "Wait, wait, friend," said the little tailor, "I shall soon know how to calm you!" And quite calmly, as if troubled by nothing, he took walnuts from his pocket, began to crack them and enjoy them.

Seeing this, the bear also wanted to crack some nuts. The little tailor put his hand into his pocket and gave him a full handful, only not of nuts, but of pebbles. The bear put one of them into his mouth, but could do nothing with it, however hard he tried to crack it. "What a fool I am," thought the bear, "I cannot crack a single nut." And he said to the little tailor: "Come now, you crack them." "There you see what kind of fellow you are," the little tailor teased him; "your jaws are so huge, yet you cannot crack a little nut!"

He took the stones from him, put a real nut instead of a stone into his mouth—and immediately cracked it. "Let me try once more!" said the bear. "When I look from the side, it seems not difficult at all." And again our cunning fellow slipped him some stones, and again the bear struggled over them in vain and could not crack them.

After that the little tailor pulled out from under the skirt of his coat a little fiddle and began to play on it! And the bear, as soon as he heard the music, could not restrain himself, but began to dance, and when he had danced a little, he was so enchanted by it that he turned to the little tailor and asked: "Tell me, please, is it a difficult thing—to play the fiddle?" "Mere trifles," answered the other; "you see, with my left hand I pluck the strings, and with my right I saw across them with the bow, and off it goes dancing and hopping!" "That is just how I would like to play the fiddle," said the bear, "so that I might dance whenever I feel like it! What do you think?.. Will you undertake to teach me?" "With pleasure, provided you show aptitude for it. But show me your paws! Oh, what huge ones! Let me shorten your nails for you."

And so a vise was brought; the bear, in his folly, put his paws into it, and the tailor tightened the screw firmly and said: "Well, just wait—I'll come to you presently with the scissors." And leaving the bear to roar as much as his heart desired, he himself lay down in a corner on a bundle of straw and fell asleep.

The princess, hearing the bear's roaring since evening, supposed that he was roaring from joy and that he had already dealt with the tailor in his own fashion.

In the morning she rose very contented and free from any worry, but when she looked into the stable, she saw that the little tailor stood before the stable door, healthy as could be and merry as could be.

Then she did not dare to utter a word of objection, for she had to fulfill the promise given before everyone.

And so the king ordered a carriage to be brought, in which she was to go together with the tailor to the church to be married.

When they had already seated themselves in the carriage, the two other tailors, cunning at heart and envious of their companion's happiness, went into the stable to the bear and freed him from the vise.

The enraged bear immediately galloped off at full speed after the royal carriage.

The princess heard from afar his snorting and roaring; she became frightened and exclaimed: "Oh, the bear is chasing us and wants to carry you away!" But the nimble little tailor immediately stood on his head, stuck his legs out of the carriage window, and shouted: "Do you see the vise? If you do not go back, you will end up in it again!"

As soon as the bear heard this—he immediately turned back, and off he went as fast as his legs could carry him!

And the little tailor rode quite calmly to the church, was married to the princess, and lived with her in plenty and goodness, singing merrily.

Well, there you have it: if you wish to believe, then believe; if you do not wish, then pay money.