

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Valiant Little Tailor**



Once upon a time there was a little tailor who lived in a town called Romadia, and one day, while he was working, he had an apple on the bench beside him, and as often happens in summertime, many flies had settled on it, attracted by the apple's sweet scent. Incensed at this, the little tailor took a strip of cloth which he had been just about to drop into the hell* and struck the apple with it; and on inspection, he found that seven flies had been slain. Well, the little tailor thought to himself, what a hero you are! He immediately had a suit of shining armour made for himself, and on the breastplate he had written in letters of gold: Seven at a Stroke. After that the little tailor walked around the streets and alleys attired in his armour, and those who saw him thought that the hero had felled seven men with *one* stroke, and they were afraid.

Now in this same land there was a King whose praises were sung far and wide, and the lazy tailor betook himself to this monarch, having hung up his needle, shears, and iron immediately after his heroic deed. He entered the courtyard of the royal palace, lay down on the grass there, and fell asleep. The court servants, as they passed in and out, saw the tailor in his rich armour and read the gold script, and greatly wondered what this bellicose man wanted, right now, in these times of peace, at the King's court? It seemed to them that he was undoubtedly some great lord.

The King's councillors having likewise seen the sleeping tailor, did inform His Majesty, their most graceful King, of such, with the most humble observation that, should a martial conflict arise, this hero could prove to be a very useful man and render the land good services. The King was well pleased with these words, so he sent at once for the armoured tailor and asked him if he wished to join his service. The tailor replied that he had come for that very reason, and he asked His Royal Majesty, if His Highness were thinking of making use of him, to most graciously confer upon him the honour of service. The King promised the little tailor a position, ordained for him splendid lodgings and rooms, and gave him a good salary, which enabled him to live a life of luxury without having to do anything.

It did not take long for the King's knights, who had but a meagre pay, to conceive a hatred against the good tailor, and they would dearly have liked him to go to the Devil; but at the same time they feared that, should they fall out with him, they would not be able to offer him sufficient resistance, for he would certainly strike seven of them dead with one stroke, otherwise the pack of knights would willingly have bitten him out; and so,

every hour of every day, they thought of how they could rid themselves of the fearsome warrior. However, their wit and acumen being cut rather short, like their coats, they could not find a ruse to remove the hero from Court, and in the end they conferred together and decided to appear before the King all at the same time and request leave and discharge – and that is what they did.

When the good King saw that all his faithful servants wanted to leave him because of one single man, he was sadder than ever before and wished that he had never set eyes on the hero; yet he shrank back from sending him away, for he could not but fear that he, together with all his subjects, would be slain by him and afterwards his kingdom would be possessed by the stern warrior. Now as the King sought advice on what could possibly be done in this difficult matter to turn it to his advantage and bring everything to an amicable end, he at last devised a ruse with which he thought to rid himself of, and get away from, the warrior (whom no one reckoned to be a tailor). He sent at once for the hero and told him how he (the King) had been given to understand that never a stronger or more powerful hero was to be found under the sun than he (the tailor). Now in a nearby forest there lived two giants who were doing him inordinate harm, robbing, murdering, and roaming over the land with fire and flame, and no one could prevail over them either with weapons or in any other way, for they slew everyone; and if he would venture to kill the giants, and did indeed kill them, then he would receive the King's daughter as his lawful spouse with half of the kingdom as dowry; also, the King was willing to supply him with a hundred knights to take along as help against the giants.

These words of the King put the tailor in excellent spirits, and it seemed to him a fine thing that he was to be a King's son-in-law and receive half a kingdom as dowry; so he spoke boldly: he would willingly be at the King's, his most gracious master's, service and slay the giants, and he would surely be able to kill them without the help of the hundred knights. After this, he proceeded into the forest, told the hundred knights who had been made to follow him on the King's command to wait at the edge, and walked into a thicket where he peered around to see if there were any sign of the giants. And in the end, after a lengthy search, he found them both sleeping under a tree and snoring so mightily that the branches of the trees



rustled back and forth as if bent by a tempest.

The tailor did not hesitate long but, quickly filling his breast with the stones he picked up, he climbed up the tree under which the giants were lying and threw a rough stone at the breast of one of them. This giant instantly woke up, flew into a passion with his companion, and asked why he was hitting him? The second giant excused himself the best he could, saying he had not lashed out knowingly, it must have happened in his sleep. Now when they had fallen asleep again, the tailor took another stone and threw it at the second giant, who started up in a rage at his comrade and asked why he was throwing stones at him? And now it was the first giant who did not know what the other was talking about. Now when, after some squabbling, sleep had closed the eyes of both giants, the tailor once again threw a stone very forcefully at the second one, who could bear this no longer and

hit out violently at his companion, whom he believed to have struck him; the other giant, in his turn, would not suffer this, and they both leapt to their feet, tore trees out of the earth – but fortunately they left alone the tree in which the tailor was sitting – and they thrashed each other with the trees so ferociously that they ended up beating one another to death.

When the tailor saw, from his tree, that the giants had killed one another, his spirits rose higher than ever before, and he cheerfully climbed down the tree, cut a wound or several in each giant's body with his sword, and went out of the forest to join the knights. They asked him if he had discovered the giants or if he had not seen them anywhere. "Yes," said the tailor – "discovered and seen and slain the two of them – that have I, and left them lying under a tree." This was astonishing to hear for the knights, and being unable and unwilling to believe that *one* man could have come away from the giants so unscathed, and killed them as well, they now rode into the forest themselves to look at this wonder, and they found everything to be just as the tailor-hero had said. The knights were greatly amazed at this and felt a terrible dread; and their spirits fell even lower, for they feared that the victor would kill them all if he conceived an enmity against them; and they rode home and told the King what had happened.

Now when the tailor came to the King, personally reported his deed, and desired the hand of the King's daughter along with half the kingdom, the King bitterly regretted the promise he had made to the unknown warrior, for the giants were now slain and could do no further harm; and he thought about how he could justifiably rid himself of the hero, having not the slightest intention of giving him his daughter. Therefore he told the tailor

that in another forest there was, unfortunately, a unicorn which did great harm to his fish and his people, and he must capture it; if he accomplished this task, then the King would give him his daughter. The good tailor acquiesced again, and taking a rope, he went to that forest where the wild unicorn lived. He ordered his hunter allies to wait outside the forest, for he would enter alone and accomplish the feat alone, just as he had overcome the two giants alone and without any help. When the tailor had strolled around the forest for a while, he perceives the unicorn, and it runs towards him with its horn lowered, intending to kill him. But he did not want dexterity; waiting until the unicorn had come up close to him, he swiftly slipped behind the tree he had been standing right beside. And the unicorn, running at full gallop and unable to change its course, ran headlong into the tree, which it pierced right through with its sharp horn, and the horn was stuck fast and immovable. Then the tailor, seeing the unicorn vigorously kicking at the tree, stepped out and tied the rope he had brought around its neck, bound it to the tree as tight as he could, went out of the forest to his hunting companions, and announced to them his victory over the wild unicorn. After that the tailor went to the King, humbly made mention of the happy fulfilment of the royal wish, and deferentially called attention to the twice-made royal promise. This made the King sad beyond measure, and he did not know what was to be done; the tailor craved his daughter, but he must not have her. And he desired one more thing of the warrior, namely to capture the terrible wild boar which was running free in a third forest and laying everything waste, and when he had accomplished this, then the King would give him his daughter forthwith; he would also assign to him all of his

huntsmen as helpers.

The tailor, who was not particularly enthusiastic about the King's new demand, went off to the forest with his companions, and once they reached



the edge of the wood he ordered them to stay outside.

The hunters were heartily glad and content to do this, for the wild boar had frequently given them such a reception

that many of their number had never made the return

journey, and not one of them felt any further desire to hunt

it. So they thanked the tailor most sincerely for venturing

into peril alone and leaving them back there out of harm's way. The tailor

had not been walking in the forest for long when the wild boar caught sight

of him and rushed towards him, with foaming jaws and salivating tusks,

intent on trampling him into the ground, so that his heart

trembled and he looked swiftly around in search of

salvation. Fortunately, there was a tumbledown old

chapel in the forest, in which people had received

indulgences in days of yore, and as the tailor was nearby,

he espied the chapel and was inside it in one bound, then he was out again

at the end opposite the door, a leap in the air taking him through a window

with no remaining panes; and the wild sow had followed him straight away

and was now crashing around in the chapel, while the tailor speedily ran

around the little house, rushed up to the door and hurriedly slammed it shut,

thus trapping the cruel beast in the church. Then he went to his hunting

companions and announced his feat to them; they came to see, found his

account to be true and accurate, and rode home deeply astonished, where



they made their report to the King. Now whether the news of the heroic warrior happily achieving yet another victory gave the King more joy or sadness may easily be surmised by anyone, even those of little understanding, for the King now had to give the tailor his daughter or fear that he would turn his heroic strength, of which he had given three such amazing proofs, against him. Yet there can surely be no doubt that the King, had he known for certain that the hero was a tailor, would sooner have given him a rope to hang him with than his daughter. Now, whether the King would give his daughter with a light or heavy heart, willingly or unwillingly, to a man of no background and no birth to speak of, other than that which his mother had given him, the little tailor asked very little, or not at all; he was proud and glad to have become the King's daughter's husband, and that was enough. So the wedding was celebrated with not the greatest enthusiasm on the royal side, and a tailor had become a King's son-in-law – indeed, a King.

When some little time had gone by, the young Queen heard her lord and husband talking in his sleep, and she clearly heard the words: “Boy, make the jerkin, darn the trousers – make haste – or I’ll – hit you over the head with the yardstick!” This seemed astonishing to the young King's spouse, who quickly realised that her husband was a tailor, and she reported this to her lord and father, asking him to deliver her from this man. The King was cut to the quick to hear that he had been obliged to marry his only daughter to a tailor, but he consoled her the best he could and told her to leave her bedroom door open that night, for several servants would be standing before it, and when they heard those words being repeated they

would go in and kill the man without further ado. The young lady was satisfied and promised to do this. Now the King had at his Court an armour-bearer who was well-disposed towards the tailor, and on hearing the King's faithless words he hurriedly betook himself to the young king and disclosed to him the severe judgement that had just that moment been issued and pronounced on him, and he besought him to make every effort to defend his life. The tailor-king thanked him warmly for his warning and told him that he knew very well what was to be done in this matter. Now when night had come, the young king repaired to his bed with his wife at the usual hour and soon pretended to be asleep. Then the lady secretly got up and opened the door, whereupon she silently lay down again. After a while, the young king began to speak as if in sleep, but in a loud voice that those outside before the door could clearly hear: "Boy, make the trousers – patch – the jerkin, or I'll hit you over the head with the yardstick. I – have killed – seven at a stroke – I've struck dead – two giants – I've captured the unicorn – I've also captured the wild sow – should I fear those – those who stand outside the bedroom door?" When the servants outside heard these words they fled as if a thousand devils were hunting them, and none of them wanted to be the one who dared to face the tailor. And so the brave little tailor was and remained a king as long as he lived and up until his dying day.



*hell: "a place into which a tailor throws his shreds" (Webster's 1828 dictionary). Samuel Butler, in his *Hudibras* (1663-78), gives a more cynical definition: "taylors call that place hell, where they put all they steal" (note to Canto I, Part I, l. 476).