Name: _____ Date: _____

The Sprightly Tailor

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1038 words

A long time ago, in the west of Scotland, a lively little tailor lived near Saddell Castle. He was known all over the district as the sprightly tailor, because he walked quickly, talked cheerfully and sewed faster than anyone for miles around. One autumn the lord of the castle, a man called Macdonald, sent for him. "I need a new pair of trews," said the laird, "and I will pay you a handsome reward. But there is one condition."

Trews were the close-fitting trousers that people wore in those days, trimmed with fringe and very comfortable for walking or dancing. "The condition," said Macdonald, "is that you must make them at night, in the old church up the glen." The church was a ruin, and everybody in the district said it was haunted. Strange sounds came out of it after dark, and nobody who lived nearby would go inside once the sun had gone down.

The sprightly tailor thought it over. He was a sensible man, and he knew the stories as well as anybody. But he also knew how much a handsome reward could buy, and he was not a man who gave up easily. "Very well, my lord," he said. "I will make your trews in the church tonight." The laird raised his eyebrows, for he had expected the tailor to say no, and then he sent a servant to fetch the cloth.

That evening the tailor packed his needle, his thread, his thimble and a candle into a little bag, tucked the cloth under his arm, and set off up the glen. It was half a mile from the castle to the church, and the path was dark and stony. An owl hooted. The wind sighed in the bracken. But the tailor whistled all the way, and when he reached the crumbling walls, he walked straight in as if he were stepping into his own workshop.

Inside, he looked around until he found a flat gravestone, which made a fine seat. He lit his candle and stood it beside him, slipped his thimble on his finger, and spread the cloth across his knees. Then he threaded his needle and set to work. In and out, in and out, went the needle, and the tailor hummed a tune and thought about the reward. "A good night's work," he said to himself, "and a pocketful of money in the morning."

For a while all was quiet. Then the floor began to tremble under his feet, and the candle flame shivered. The tailor looked about without letting his fingers stop, and he saw something rising slowly through the stone floor of the church. It was an enormous head, as big as a barrel, and it came up and up until its eyes were level with his own. Then a deep voice boomed through the ruin. "Do you see this great head of mine?"

"I see that," said the tailor calmly, "but I will sew this." And he went on stitching. The head rose higher, and a thick neck appeared underneath it. "Do you see this great neck of mine?" roared the voice. "I see that," said the tailor, "but I will sew this." His needle flashed in the candlelight.

The giant figure kept rising, and next came a pair of huge shoulders, and a chest as wide as a barn door.

"Do you see this great chest of mine?" the voice thundered, and the walls of the church shook. "I see that," said the tailor, "but I will sew this!" He was stitching so fast now that his thread whistled. Up came two enormous arms, and the figure waved them in front of his face. "Do you see these great arms of mine?" "I see those," said the tailor, "but I will sew this!" He knew he had no time to waste.

The tailor was almost at the end of the last seam. The figure lifted one great leg out of the floor and stamped it down on the stones, so hard that the candle jumped. "Do you see this great leg of mine?" it bellowed. "Aye, aye, I see that," cried the tailor, "but I will sew this!" His fingers flew. With three more long stitches he reached the end of the cloth, and as the second leg started to rise, he bit off the thread.

He blew out the candle, sprang off the gravestone, tucked the trews under his arm, and ran out of the church as fast as he could go. Behind him the huge figure gave a roar of rage and came stamping out of the door in pursuit. Down the glen they raced, faster than a stream in flood. But the tailor had a head start and a nimble pair of legs, and he was not going to lose his reward to a ghost.

"Stop!" roared the figure, but the sprightly tailor did not stop. He held his trews tight and never let the darkness grow under his feet, until he reached Saddell Castle. He tumbled through the gate and slammed it behind him. A moment later the huge figure arrived, bellowing with fury, and struck its hand against the stone wall above the gate. Then, with a last grumbling howl, it turned around and stalked away into the night, and it was not seen again.

In the morning the servants found five great fingermarks pressed deep into the stone above the gate, and they say you can see them there to this day, if you peer closely enough. The laird took the trews, turned them over and tried them on. They fitted him perfectly. He paid the sprightly tailor every penny of the handsome reward, and he never noticed that a few of the stitches were rather long.

The tailor went home whistling, with the money jingling in his pocket. All his neighbours begged him to tell the story, and he told it so well that people came from villages far away to hear it. But he never sewed in the old church again, and when someone asked him why, he only smiled. "A tailor has to know when his work is done," he said, "and when it is time to run."

Questions

1. Where did the laird want the trews made?

A. In the castle kitchen

B. In an old church at night

C. By the river

2. What did the tailor say each time the voice asked him a question?

A. "Please go away"
B. "I see that, but I will sew this"
C. "I do not know"

3. Why did the tailor keep sewing?

A. He was too frightened to move
B. He wanted to finish before the figure rose all the way
C. He did not hear the voice

4. What did the laird never notice?

A. That the trews were too short
B. That some stitches were long
C. That the tailor was late

5. In this story, a nimble pair of legs is one that is

A. slow and heavy
B. quick and light
C. tired and sore

Words to know

sprightly: quick and lively
laird: Scottish landowner
trews: snug trousers
glen: narrow valley
nimble: quick-footed

Answer key: The Sprightly Tailor

1. B. In an old church at night
2. B. "I see that, but I will sew this"
3. B. He wanted to finish before the figure rose all the way
4. B. That some stitches were long
5. B. quick and light