

TOMKIN AND THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL

By Vivian French

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THERE was once a little tailor called Tomkin. He had no mother, no father, no brothers and no sisters. He had nothing that belonged to him except for his needles, his reels of cotton, his scissors, and a three-legged stool, but he sang and he whistled as he worked.

One night Tomkin had a dream. He dreamed that instead of hard bread and water for his supper he had hot cabbage soup with soft white rolls. He dreamed that instead of sleeping on a cold and draughty bench he had a warm and cosy bed with thick red blankets. He dreamed that instead of sitting all day on a little wooden stool with three legs, he sat on a golden throne.

Tomkin sat up on his bench and rubbed his eyes.

“Well!” he said. “That was a good dream—the best I’ve ever had. Hot cabbage soup! Thick red blankets! And me a king—whatever can it mean?” He scratched his head, and looked at his three-legged stool.

“What do you think?” he asked.

The three-legged stool turned around twice and bowed.

“I think Your Majesty should go out and find your kingdom,” it said.

“You’re quite right,” said Tomkin. “All I do here is mend shirts and stockings and sew on the mayor’s buttons twice a week. I’ll be off right away.” He hopped off the bench and packed a bag with all his needles, three reels of cotton and a pair of sharp scissors.

“Now I’m ready,” he said, but he didn’t go out through the door.

“What are you waiting for?” asked the three-legged stool.

“I was wondering if I’d be lonely, travelling all the way to my kingdom on my own,” said Tomkin.

“It might be near, or it might be far,” said the three-legged stool. “Shall I come with you?”

“Yes, please,” said Tomkin, “and when I’m king I promise I’ll make you prime minister.” The stool spun round on one leg and sang:

*“Promises, promises, one, two, three,
A king will never remember me.”*

“Oh, yes, I will,” said Tomkin, and they went through the door together.

Tomkin walked along the road with a hop, a skip and a jump, and the three-legged stool trundled along beside him. They walked through a forest and over a hill and down into the valley on the other side. Sometimes they talked, and sometimes they were silent, and sometimes Tomkin whistled a tune and the stool danced on its three wooden legs.

Down in the valley was a wide river and Tomkin and the three-legged stool came to a stop.

“Oh, dear,” said Tomkin, “I can’t swim! Do you think my kingdom is on this side or the other side of the river?”

“It might be far, or it might be near,” said the stool. “But as to swimming—just throw me in and hold on tightly!”

Tomkin waded into the rushing water, holding on to the stool. The current caught him and swirled him off his feet, but the wooden stool bobbed and floated on top of the water.

“Oof!” spluttered Tomkin, and he kicked and splashed until he and the stool were on the far side of the river. They staggered up the bank and sat down to rest.

“You’re a very good swimmer,” Tomkin said to the three-legged stool. “And when I’m king I promise I’ll make you prime minister.”

The stool spun round on two legs and sang:

*“Promises, promises, one, two, three,
A king will never remember me.”*

“Yes, I will,” said Tomkin indignantly.

Tomkin and the stool walked on and on, and as they walked they noticed that the grass and bushes on either side of the path were dusty brown. The trees had no leaves and the earth was hard and cracked.

“It looks as if it hasn’t rained here for ages and ages,” said Tomkin. “But it must be going to rain soon—look at the sky!”

The sky was leaden grey, and a huge black cloud was swirling round the top of the hill ahead of them. They could see a village halfway up the hill, and beyond the village was a castle.

“Maybe that’s my kingdom,” Tomkin said.

“Maybe it is,” said the stool. “It certainly looks as if all the people have come out to meet us.”

Tomkin stopped and stared. The three-legged stool was quite right—many men and women and children were hurrying down the hill towards them.

Tomkin shook his head. “I don’t think I want to be king here,” he said. “All these people look as sad as sad can be.”

A bony little girl reached Tomkin and the three legged stool first.

“Oh, please!” she gasped, clutching at Tomkin’s arm. “Please—have you come to make it rain?”

“What?” Tomkin said. “What do you mean? There’s the biggest blackest cloud I ever saw over there—it must be about to rain puddles and ponds and lakes and seas any moment now.”

The little girl began to cry, although not one tear came out of her eyes. “But that’s just it!” she wailed. “The cloud is always there—but it never, ever rains! All our rivers have dried up, and we’ve had no water now for days and weeks and months. Our cows and sheep have run away, and we have nothing left to eat but one cupful of flour. All our fields are dry and bare except for one small cabbage. And if it doesn’t rain soon, we will all dry up into dust and blow away in the wind.”

Tomkin looked around him at all the people. They were gazing at him, their eyes huge and hopeful in their thin pinched faces. He looked up at the black cloud, and he shifted his bag on his back and rubbed his nose.

“Well...” he said.

“Ahem,” said the three-legged stool in a small voice beside him. “Doesn’t that cloud look full of rain? As full of rain as a bag might be full of needles and reels of cotton...but one snip from your scissors and they’d all fall out!”

“Oh!” said Tomkin. “Oh, yes! How clever you are—when I’m king I’m certainly going to make you prime minister!” The stool spun round on three legs and sang:

*“Promises, promises, one, two, three,
A king will never remember me.”*

“Just you wait and see!” said Tomkin, and he marched on along the path and up the hill.

“Be careful!” the stool called after him. “A little can go a very long way!”

“I know what I’m doing,” said Tomkin.

Up and up he went; past the village and past the castle until he was at the top of the hill and the huge black cloud was billowing just above his head. Tomkin swung the bag off his back and pulled out his scissors.

“Look at me!” he shouted.

Snip! Snap! Rip! Tomkin cut three long slashes right across the cloud. WHOOSH! the rush of rain washed him off his feet and sent him gasping and tumbling all the way back down to the bottom of the hill.

“HURRAH! HURRAH! HURRAH!” shouted the men and the women and the children, and they danced round and round in the silver sheets of pouring rain. They laughed and they sang and they cried and they cheered, and they picked up Tomkin carried him back up the hill to the castle.

“You must be our king!” they said, and they sat him on a golden throne and put a golden crown on his head. They fetched him hot cabbage soup and soft white rolls, and they showed him his bed heaped with thick red blankets.

At the bottom of the hill the three-legged stool waited for Tomkin. It stood there with the rain beating down on it, and a cold wind blowing about it. In a small, sad voice it sang:

*"Promises, promises, one, two, three,
When will the king remember me?"*

It went on raining. It rained without stopping, day and night, night and day. The trees and the fields grew green, and then became dark and heavy with the never-ending rain. Up in the castle Tomkin laughed and danced and sang, but as the rains went on he watched the rivers begin to flow again, and then fill and fill until they flooded their banks and rushed and gushed all over the countryside. The men and the women and the children stopped being happy and began to complain.

"What's the use of rain if it never stops?" they asked each other. "We were unhappy before, but if the floods wash our village away we'll be even worse off." And they walked up the path to the castle and demanded to see King Tomkin.

"You must stop the rain and bring back the sun," they said. "If you can't, we'll take away your crown and send you off on your travels again."

"Oh, dear," said Tomkin. "Well—maybe I could sew the holes together."

He put his bag on his back and walked out of the castle and up to the top of the hill with the villagers following behind him. The black cloud was still in the sky, but it had poured out so much water that it was now high up, and far beyond his reach. Tomkin rubbed his nose.

"I need a ladder," he said. "I need lots of ladders."

"Then will you make it stop raining?" asked a little boy.

Tomkin nodded. "I'll try," he said.

"Hurrah!" shouted the little boy. "King Tomkin is going to mend the cloud!"

All the men and women and children from the village went hurrying off through the rain to fetch their ladders. They fetched their tables, and they fetched their chairs, and they heaped them one on top of the other into a tower that rose higher and higher.

"It's not high enough," Tomkin said. "What else have you got?"

They brought out beds and baths and chests of drawers. They carried dressers and cupboards and baskets and buckets and boxes, and piled them up and up.

"Is there anything else?" asked Tomkin.

“Nothing,” said the villagers, staring at the tottering tower and shaking their dripping heads. “There’s not so much as a bead box left to bring.”

“All right,” said Tomkin. “Now I’ll see what I can do.” And he began to climb.

Up went Tomkin, pulling himself up the ladders and climbing up and over the cupboards and chairs. Soon he could see the world around him for miles and miles, and still he climbed up and up. The big black cloud grew closer and closer, and he shook the rain from his eyes and kept on climbing.

Tomkin reached the top of the tower. He stood on the highest chair and stretched upwards...and he couldn’t reach. He could see the three long splits in the cloud, but he was just too far away to touch them.

“I can’t do it!” Tomkin said. “I can’t reach.”

The villagers began to whisper to each other and to mutter and to growl. “Throw down your crown, Tomkin!” they shouted. “You’re no king of ours! Throw down your crown, and be on your way!”

Tomkin looked down. He saw the cold, miserable villagers, and he saw that all their tables and chairs and cupboards and beds and boxes were wet and spoiled. He saw the rain-soaked fields, and the rippling floodwater creeping closer and closer to the village. And far, far off, at the bottom of the path, he saw the three-legged stool patiently waiting for him.

Tomkin took a deep breath. “I cut the cloud too deeply and I’ve made it rain for ever and ever,” he said. “And I forgot my oldest friend. I don’t deserve to be a king,” and he tossed the crown to the ground. His tears dropped down and mixed with the streams of water flowing down the hill. down to the three-legged stool.

Up jumped the stool, and hurried up the hill.

“Stop!” it called. “Wait for me!” And it scurried through the groups of wailing villagers to the bottom of the tower. Tomkin was sitting at the top with his head in his hands, but when he heard the stool calling he sat up straight and wiped his eyes.

Everyone watched the stool scrambling up the tower. Up and up it went, and when it reached the top Tomkin held it steady.

“I’m so sorry I forgot you,” he said. “I truly am.”

“No time for that now,” said the stool as it balanced itself on top of the very topmost chair. “Come along—climb on me.”

Tomkin took his needles and thread out of his bag, and climbed on the stool. He was just high enough to reach the three long rips in the cloud and he began to sew. He sewed all day long without stopping once, and gradually the rain grew less and less, until by the evening there was only a fine mist in the air.

“A couple more stitches and I’ll be done,” said Tomkin.

“That’s good,” said the stool.

Tomkin stopped suddenly.

“Oh!” he said. “Oh, no!”

“What’s the matter?” asked the stool. “It’s no good,” Tomkin said,

“It’s no good at all. There are needle holes in the cloud at the beginning and end of every stitch. I can see thousands of water drops squeezing through them I’ll never be able to stop the rain.”

“Nobody wants you to stop the rain for ever,” said the stool. “Finish your stitching.”

“But it’s no good,” Tomkin said. “The whole village will be washed away, and it’s all my fault.” He made his last stitch and pulled it tight.

“Well done,” said the stool. “Now look!” Tomkin looked. The setting sun had come creeping out from behind the cloud and was shining through the mist. A rainbow was shimmering from one side of the hill to the other, and the puddles and ponds and lakes were shining golden mirrors of light.

“KING TOMKIN! KING TOMKIN!” called the villagers. “Come down and take up your crown!”

Tomkin shook his head, and began climbing down the tower with the three-legged stool close behind him. Halfway down, a gust of wind blew a flurry of raindrops against Tomkin’s face.

“Why!” he said. “The rain’s like silver needles! It must be blowing through the needle holes in the cloud—but it isn’t rushing and gushing like it was before.”

“That’s right,” said the stool. “A little can go a very long way.”

Tomkin reached the ground, picked up the crown and handed it to the oldest villager.

“I’m not fit to be a king,” he said, “but if you want someone wise and clever I think you should ask the three-legged stool.”

The villager bowed to the stool, and the stool bowed back.

“A king,” said the stool, “should always know when he’s made a mistake.”

“Quite so,” said the oldest villager. “And a king should be willing to work all day without stopping for the good of his people,” said the stool.

“My thoughts exactly,” said the oldest villager.

“And a king should be as happy when he has nothing but a bag of needles as when he has a golden throne.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” said the oldest villager, and he picked up the golden crown and handed it back to Tomkin.

“Hurrah for King Tomkin!” shouted all the villagers.

Tomkin held up his hand and the men and the women and the children were silent.

“Thank you very much,” he said, and he bowed, “But I will only be king if the three-legged stool is prime minister.” “It will be my pleasure,” said the three-legged stool.

“Hurrah for the three-legged stool! Three cheers for our prime minister! And three more cheers for our wonderful king!” The villagers picked Tomkin up and carried him off to the castle.

The three-legged stool and the oldest villager walked up the path together. “The best king of all,” said the oldest villager, “is a king who keeps his promises.”

And the stool sang:

*“Promises, promises, one, two, three,
This is the king for you and me!”*

and he followed Tomkin into the castle with a hop, a skip and a jump.