

## Zhuang Brocade

CHINA

Long ago in China, there was a woman who could weave magic. She wove cloth so lifelike you would swear it was real. If she wove a peach, you could feel its juice drip down your chin. If she wove incense, you could smell the sharp smoke. If she wove the breeze, it stroked your skin. Since her cloth was so wondrous, she sold it with ease and thus could support her three sons.

One day she was in a small shop, exchanging cloth for rice. Suddenly she looked up and saw a new painting on the wall. It was of a land far away and quite magical. A cool marble pavilion stood in the shadow of a cliff. Bamboo swayed proudly; pines beckoned, and deer grazed near a pond full of shining carp. Looking at it gave her such peace that she knew she must have the painting.

"Would you trade that picture for more of my cloth?" she asked the merchant hopefully. Well pleased, he agreed at once and the woman soon started home, clutching the painting. She stopped often on the way, simply to gaze at its quiet beauty.

After she returned home, she showed the painting to her eldest son and asked, "Wouldn't you love to live in this land?"

"Foolish woman," he said. "You can't live in a painting." She turned to her second son, saying, "How about you? You would like to live here, no?"

"Get back to work, mother," he replied with a laugh, "and stop this nonsense."

Sadly, the mother went to her youngest son and softly asked, "My son, would you like to live near this pond?"

The boy looked at his mother, then at the painting, before he spoke.

"Mother," he said gently, "you can't live in a picture, that

is true. But you weave such marvelous cloth. Why don't you weave this painting, and then when we look at it, we will feel as if we live right in it."

"Ah, yes, I will. I must," she said eagerly. Quickly, she gathered her finest silk thread and set up her loom. She began to work long, long hours weaving and weaving.

Her three sons now had to chop wood steadily to support the family. So when a year had passed and she was still not done, the two older boys were much annoyed.

"Mother," they cried, "you must give up this useless idea and get back to your real work." But her youngest son said at once, "No, mother must finish. I will chop enough for our needs."

Thus the young boy had to chop all day and into the dark, while his mother worked equally hard. She began to burn pine needles to light the night. When another year had almost passed, her eyes one day pained so much that great tears fell upon her work. But she did not push them away. Instead, she wove them right into the cloth and they became a strong, flowing river running through the magical land.

On and on she worked and now three years were almost over. Her fingers ached, her eyes burned. One night as she worked, great drops of blood fell from her eyes, right upon the cloth. But again, she did not push the blood aside. Rather, she wove it into the cloth and the blood turned into the brightest red flowers and a brilliant sun.

Then at last, the cloth was finished. With trembling fingers, she removed it from the loom and showed it to her sons. They were amazed at what she had done.

"Mother, it is truly beautiful," they agreed. "You have woven a miracle."

Well pleased, the mother took the cloth outside, so that the heavens themselves could see. She laid the cloth gently down on the ground, but suddenly a breeze came and carried it away.

"Come back!" she cried running after it. "Come back ..." But it was gone and she collapsed upon the ground. She cried out to her sons, begging them to find her cloth. The eldest son soon started off in search of it. He journeyed for almost a month, resting often, sleeping late. Finally, he came to a mountain and saw a stone house, a stone horse, stone berries, and a

woman made of stories, not stone.

"Old woman, have you seen my mother's fine cloth?" he called out.

"Oh yes," she said. "The fairies from Sun Mountain have taken it as a model for their needlework. You can try to get it back, but it will be very hard. First, you must take a rock and break off your two front teeth. Then place them in my horse's mouth and mount him. He will eat my stone berries, then take you over Flame Mountain, where the fire will burn you. But you must not cry out, not even a whisper, or you will die.

"If you make it through the fire, you will come to the Sea of Ice, where great frozen blocks will crash all round you. If you so much as shudder, you will be crushed. If by some chance you make it through, you will come to Sun Mountain. If you reach the top, perhaps the fairies will give you the cloth. Or perhaps they will make you disappear forever!"

The son felt his two front teeth and started to shiver.

"I knew you couldn't do it," said the woman. She reached down and offered him a small box. "Here, take this bit of gold and be gone."

Eagerly he snatched it and ran away. But, being a greedy soul, he decided to go live in the city, alone, and to keep the gold all for himself.

When he did not return, the second son was sent. He met the same woman, heard the same words, and took the gold as well. Back in the mother's poor house, after long months of waiting, she was now as thin as a twig, her eyes almost blind from tears.

"My son, you must go and hurry, please," she begged. Her youngest son set off, running day and night until he came to the mountain. He listened to the woman and, as she reached down for gold, picked up a rock and knocked out his teeth. Quickly he pushed them into the stone horse, who ate the berries, and at once the two flew over Flame Mountain.

Wild fingers of fire licked all about him, but his love helped him stay still. Next they came to the Sea of Ice. It was so cold he longed to scream and scream, but then, as in a dream, he felt a warm breeze and saw Sun Mountain.

Up a cloud ladder he climbed to the top. There he saw a fine jade pavilion, with curtains of crystal, and inside, lovely ladies wearing silks rich with dragons and unicorns. In the

midst of a grand hall, he saw his mother's cloth, proudly displayed upon a golden stand. All the fairies were trying to copy it, so when he reached out to take it, they cried, "No, please, we are almost finished. Give us just one more night."

The kindhearted boy agreed and they served him lichee nuts and peach blossom wine. Soon he slept, while a lovely girl in bright red finished her cloth. She took it up to the mother's and compared the two. Then her face grew sad. For her river was not as full of life, her flowers seemed so pale, her sun had no strength. So all of a sudden, she took some red thread, stitched herself into the cloth, and disappeared.

Just then, the boy awoke, snatched the cloth, and returned down the mountain. He made it through the Sea of Ice, over Flame Mountain, and back to the old woman.

"Hurry," she said, "your mother is almost dead." She gave him his teeth and special shoes to make him fly. He was home in seconds and rushed to his mother.

"Here is the cloth," he said softly and put it on her chest. The woman could hardly see, but she held it up slowly and its brilliance pierced through the gloom of the hut. She gazed now on what she had made, on the work of many years, and she felt a great peace.

Carefully, she took it outside again, to share with the heavens. She placed it on the ground and again a breeze came. But this was a kind breeze. It did not take her weavings; it simply stretched the cloth—to the north, the south, the east, the west. And as the cloth grew and grew, suddenly the family's hut disappeared and the weeds of their old garden vanished. In their place stood a marble pavilion, a fine cliff of bamboo and pine, some deer, a pond, and a lovely lady in red.

From that day on, the mother, her son, and the fairy from Sun Mountain lived in great joy. Then one quiet fall afternoon, two tired, ragged men stumbled up to the gate and peered inside. They heard laughter and recognized voices, but did not enter because of their shame. Thus our story ends as those two walk sadly down the road, and that brilliant red sun slowly sets in the West.