

THE HERO AND THE WEAVER

By Camille Allen Laguire

Appears here with the kind permission of the author

THE GREATEST MAGIC-WEAVER in the world had tried all her life to keep her talent a secret. But people still managed to find out. Wizards and kings and heroes kept bothering her for a magic carpet or a magic cloak or some such thing. They always paid her well, but the weaver lived a simple life, and her needs were few. Now she was very old, and what she wanted most was to weave a simple tapestry. Just think, to make a beautiful picture without using any magic at all! She wasn't as good at making tapestries as she was at magic, however, and the weaving took a great deal of concentration. It also took a great deal of time, and the old woman did not think she had much time left.

So the magic-weaver moved to a small hut on a hill, far away from other people, and she worked all day long. But the tapestry wasn't going very well. When she woke up in the morning, she would look at what she'd woven the day before and decide it wasn't good enough. She would then unravel most of it and start over.

One day, when she couldn't seem to get anything right, someone knocked at the door.

"Go away," snarled the weaver. "I'm busy."

"I need a magic cloak," called the voice of a young man.

"No magic cloaks here. Go away."

"I know who you are," shouted the young man. "I know you can weave one for me."

The old woman got to her feet and stuck her head out the window. The young man ran to her and grabbed her hands.

"Please! I *must* have a magic cloak."

"I don't weave them anymore. You'll have to go elsewhere."

"Please. I will do anything. I will give you anything."

"I have everything I need, young man, so there's no point in offering."

But the young man wouldn't even let go of her hands. Obviously he would not accept her refusal, so she'd have to think of something to get rid of him.

"I suppose I could make one if you brought me some dragon whiskers."

"Yes! Make a cloak, and I will get the dragon whiskers for you."

"No, you must get the whiskers first." She yanked her hands from his grasp and slammed the shutter closed. The young man cried out so loudly that she thought she must have slammed the shutter on his fingers.

"No! No!" he cried. "I need the cloak now!"

"Dragon whiskers," she replied, and sat down again at her loom. She would have no trouble from him again. Dragons were scarce, and even if he did find one, chances were that he'd never get close enough to get any whiskers. As she picked up her shuttle she heard the young man run off.

She worked on her tapestry for two weeks and made a little progress, but not as much as she wanted. She was in the midst of tearing out two days' unsatisfactory work when there was another knock at the door.

"I have your dragon whiskers!"

"What?!" cried the old weaver. She ran to the window. "Those cannot be real dragon whiskers!"

The young man's hair and clothes were singed with fire, and he held out the long strands for her to see. They were indeed real dragon whiskers.

"Now weave me a magic cloak—and hurry! I've wasted two whole weeks."

"Well, I ... I ... "The weaver thought carefully how to get rid of him again. "I can't," she said finally.

"What?"

"I can't weave you a magic cloak. I don't have the proper fibers."

"I'll get them for you!"

"You'll have to get white seaweed from the bottom of the ocean."

That would stop him, she thought, as she turned back to her work. She didn't even think there was such a thing as white seaweed, and no one could swim to the bottom of the ocean. She set to work on her tapestry, certain that she would not be interrupted again.

It was only ten days later that the young man returned, carrying an armload of white seaweed. His clothes and hair were still wet.

Oh dear, thought the weaver, I'll never get rid of this young man.

"I'll need something else," she said, before he could say anything. He groaned and dropped his seaweed.

"Time is running out!"

"I know that," she said, thinking of her unfinished tapestry. "But I need the golden locks of a maiden who has been rescued from an evil lord—or no cloak."

The young man turned to run off again, and she called after him.

"The nearest I know of would be in the Castle of the East, but I would look elsewhere if I were you!"

She felt guilty for mentioning that place to him, for its lord was as evil as the devil himself, and so powerful that many knights had perished trying to save the maiden imprisoned in the tower. She hoped the lad would give up, but if he did not, at least she'd never hear from him again. Nor would anybody else.

Four days later she heard voices. She went to her window and saw the young man hurrying up the hill, pulling a fair maiden by the hand. The maiden's hair was long and golden.

"How much do you want?" called the maiden as they came close. She pulled a pair of scissors from her pocket, ready to cut her hair.

"Hurry and make my cloak!" said the young man. "I have no more time."

"Lad," said the old weaver in amazement, "what could a hero like you possibly need a magic cloak for? You've done the impossible three times! No man who can do all that needs a magic cloak."

"Years ago my father disowned me because I was an ungrateful child. Now he is dying, but he still refuses to see me."

"Ahh," said the weaver, nodding. "And you need a magic cloak to make you invisible, so that you may sneak in to ask his forgiveness."

"No, no. I don't need to sneak in, for the servants would surely let me see him. I am afraid the sight of me would make him so angry it would kill him sooner. No, I cannot even ask forgiveness. If I were invisible, though, I might be with him and see him one last time."

“I am sorry, lad, but whoever told you I could make such a cloak was lying...”

“No!”

“But I can make the cloak of a professional mourner, and if you keep your face covered, you may see your father without him ever knowing it is you.”

She closed her shutters and set to weaving a cloak. She used the dragon’s whiskers and the white seaweed and the maiden’s hair. She even used some of the fine silks she’d set aside for her tapestry. She wove with all the magic she had.

When she gave the cloak to the young man, it looked like a plain black mourner’s cloak. The lad put it on and hurried to see his father, who was now very weak and likely to die at any moment. The boy stood at his bedside, keeping his face well covered, and wept.

The old father opened his eyes at the sound of the weeping and looked at the cloak. The black of the cloth separated into all different colors. The weaving showed pictures, like a tapestry, and the pictures began to move. One was of a brave knight battling a dragon. In another scene the knight swam the ocean, battling sharks and nearly drowning. In the last scene the knight climbed the walls of a castle and battled its evil lord. The knight looked familiar to the old man, who sat up to look closer. Yes, it was familiar. It was ...

“My son!” he cried, as he recognized the figure in the tapestry. The lad, thinking the old man had seen his face, let the hood fall back.

“I am sorry, Father...”

“My son! I have missed you,” said the old man, and he fell back exhausted. He did not die, however. The sight of his son doing such fine deeds had revived him, and he lived for a little time longer with his son and the maiden, who soon became the young man’s bride.

The weaver, in the meantime, had taken to coming down from her hut and knocking at the young man’s door. She wanted her cloak back, for she realized that it was the finest tapestry she had ever woven. The old father, however, was fond of looking at it, and the lad wouldn’t give it up for anything.

Eventually the weaver had to go back to her hut and start again at her tapestry. This time she unraveled all that she had done before and rewove it with magic, for that is what she wove best, and there was no denying it.