

The Wizard was an unpleasant fellow, and during the cold Winter months, when the wind was blowing snow down from the Northern mountains, he was seldom seen by anyone at all. No one ever called to inquire after his health. Nobody ever posted an invitation through his door for any of the bright, musical gatherings that brought the village together to pass away the long, dark hours on the village green in the light of the roaring bonfire. In fact at this time of year it was not unusual for several weeks to have passed by in which no one in the village had so much as caught a glimpse of the wizened old man. How he obtained his daily bread was something of a mystery, though it had been observed that animals which strayed into his garden seldom returned to their owners.

But the villagers knew he was still among them, as the chimney smoked continuously all through the Winter. Sometimes through the gap in the curtains – which were drawn all year round – a shadow could be dimly seen moving about the room. And sometimes a sudden flash of light from within the house would momentarily illuminate the end of the street with an ethereal light, accompanied by a large cloud of black smoke departing swiftly out of the chimney and dispersing on the breeze.

It is little to be wondered, in a small village at this time of year, when nobody had anything much to do, that strange rumours spread, suspicions were kindled, and inquisitive children would sneak to the end of the street to peer through the glass and see what may be seen. They were invariably disappointed, for the Wizard was as circumspect as a cat.

In the Spring, however, his unwanted presence in the village was suffered more than at any other time. He frequented the market place almost daily to procure a whole variety of goods from the small collection of stalls, but whilst his custom would have been welcome he never seemed to part with any money. When he finally returned to his cottage, at the end of the day, it was with a large, haphazard assortment of items under one arm and his old leather purse weighing, if anything, slightly more than when he had arrived. How he acquired the goods nobody ever found out, though several of the merchants and shopkeepers had contrived to have him followed by some of the younger men in the village, and watched closely. But the Wizard proved too evasive – an elusive greybeard shifting about in the crowd. And he was so ill-tempered that few ventured to exchange words with him.